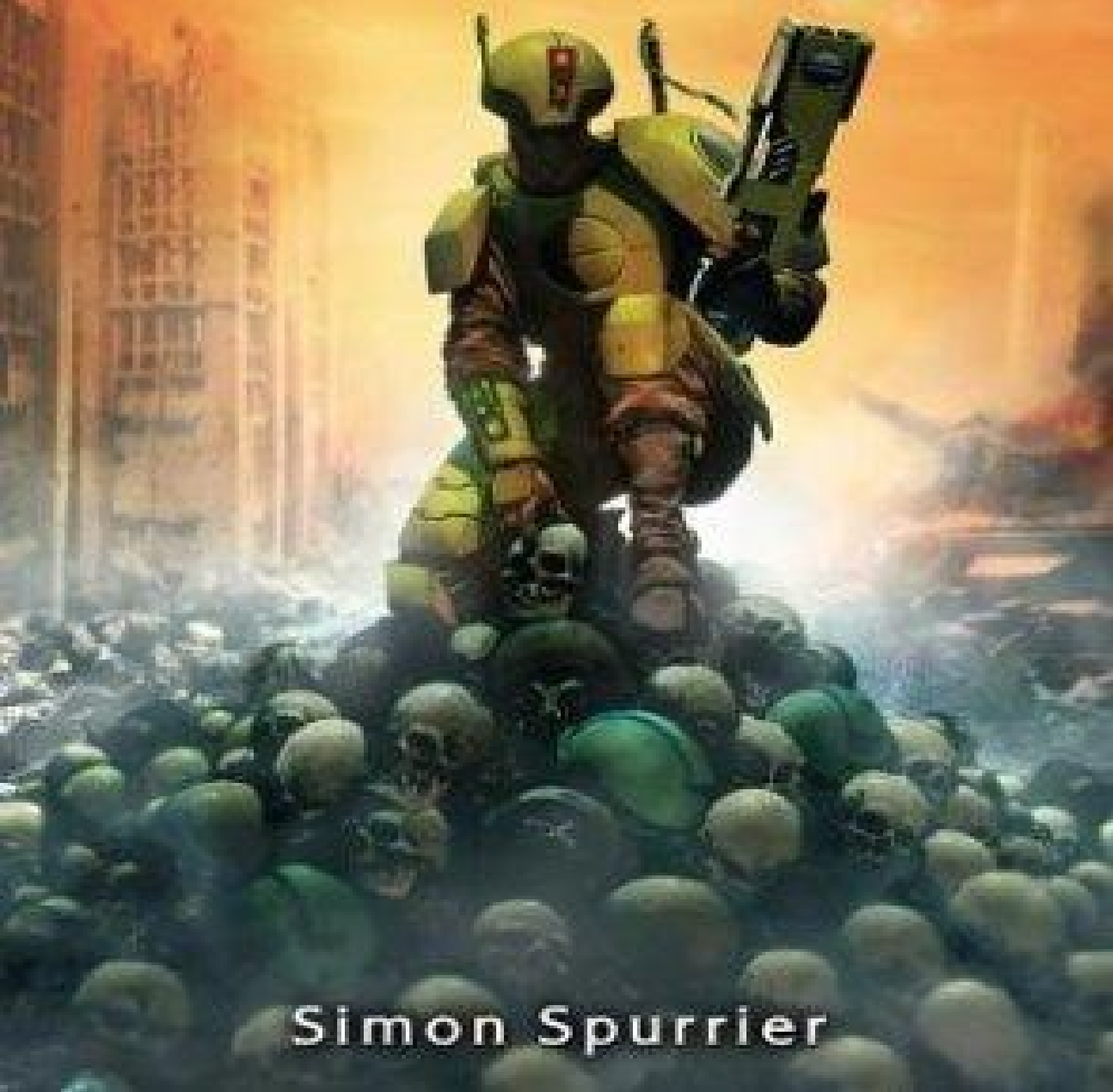


IN THE 41ST MILLENNIUM THERE IS ONLY WAR

WARHAMMER
40,000

FIRE WARRIOR



Simon Spurrier

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

FIRE WARRIOR

Simon Spurrier

(An Undead Scan v1.0)

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperors will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst his soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

PROLOGUE

Is this real?

Someone, somewhere, is screaming. The world becomes phosphor and ozone; iridescent nebulae fire-bursting across the retina, purple and blue blemishes that gyrate then fade to black. A riot of percussive madness tears at the eardrums: angry chattering that pounds the air. Everything seems alive with its ugly, echoing resonance. Bolter fire.

I can't feel my legs.

So: gather information. Analyse your surroundings. Commit details to memory. *Concentrate.*

The mind has been prepared for this. It is a fortress, impregnable and implacable. Use it.

There, directly above: a series of looping coils of ducting, once taut and efficient, now beginning to sag with the weight of years, smeared with desiccated rust, dribbling incontinently from elderly cracks and fissures. To the left, perhaps, something moving. Legs? Maybe. Colours are uncertain a lifeless mélange of pastels and blacks phasing in and out of the pain fog. Shadows and icicles. Metal clothing. Maybe blue.

I can taste blood

More gunfire. The familiar strobelight of a bolter barrel, flickering nearby. The distant report of detonating shells, finding their targets. Smoke and ashes, fire and pain.

Something screams again. Is it me?

There's a voice I recognise, ordering me not to die. Be still, it says. Save your strength, brother. Help is on its way.

The voice is lying, of course. Bitter words of comfort to the dead. My second heart just stopped.

More details! Something unique, so I'll know. Something recognisable to warn me when this, all of this, is ready to come true. There! To the right: an arrangement of cables and components, hanging in disarray from a breached console. At its centre, blinking with a particular rhythm, a pearl of perfect

white light broadcasts its meaningless pulse to the world.

Flash. Flash. Pause. Flash. Pause. Flash-Flash. Pause.

I must remember it. I must synchronise the faint beating of my remaining heart so I'll never forget; exerting every last part of my will to detect and perceive that jumbled electrical rhythm wherever it might be.

More gunfire. More screams. Someone gurgles. Maybe it is me.

The fog closes in, the blackness rolls over, the Emperor smiles.

The man in the dark forced open his eyes and took a deep breath, dormant lungs cobweb-choked and starved of oxygen. Motes of serpentine incense roiled insidiously around his head, as suffocating as it was comforting. He beckoned it away into the dark corners of the meditation cell with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Arranged as he had left them in a neat phalanx on the floor, the Imperial Tarot cards misted and returned to their neutral grey pallor, brittle psychic images bleeding away as the vision-dream concluded. One lingered briefly, the strength of its warp resonance palpable even to his exhausted mind.

The Masked Fiend, inverted.

Not a card of either major arcana, precisely, it was one of only three wild images, the significance of which depended entirely upon circumstance, timing and the preceding draw. It had been a long time since he'd last encountered the ghostly form, the angel-smooth mask concealing a reptilian visage of shadows and grins, as the last to fade: the *endura priamator*. Its translation was quite precise, in such an instance.

Hidden evil, awaiting exposure.

His heartbeat returned to normal by degrees, the blood rushing in his ears diminishing in force, no longer eclipsing the uneasy drone of the ship's massive generarium. Gauntlet-clad fingers shaking minutely with the force of the prescient revelation, he allowed himself longer than usual to clear away the ritual icons and incense candles the ceremony required. His nerves needed the time to settle themselves, his mind gradually uncovering the significance of its illusory experiences.

He was forewarned, at least. He had the time to prepare, Emperor be praised. He must be grateful for the receipt of this foreknowledge and not squander the gift in fear and regret.

He closed his eyes and it was there again, lurking beneath his eyelids, mocking him. It was a vision of himself, flailing and screaming, draining away to nothingness, choking on his own blood. In the fortress of his mind, he watched himself die over and over again.

The *Enduring Blade* moved across the void, impossibly massive, and deep inside its viscera of metal and stone, Librarian Delpheus, Epistolary of the

mighty Adeptus Astartes Ultramarines, gritted his teeth and imagined the seconds counting away the last of his life.

04.58 HRS (SYS. LOCAL DOLUMAR IV, Ultima Seg. #4356/E)

The storm was coming.

Shasla Tau Kais closed his eyes and tried not to think of it.

There would be noise and confusion, he supposed. There would be guns and blood, comm chatter and smoke. There would be screams.

Hed been taught since birth that anxiety, especially when dwelt upon, was an inefficient sentiment. Mentally reprimanding himself, he closed his eyes and set his mind adrift, not caring to dwell upon his nascent fear.

He remembered

* * * * *

On the eighth-taucyr anniversary of his birth there had been a brief pause in training.

The sand settled in the basin of the battledome, its tiered auditorium rising in silent rings overhead. Devoid of the massed crowds that gathered for the festivals every kairotaa, it seemed almost unreal in its emptiness. Kais preferred it this way, grateful that his training was conducted beyond the public gaze.

The other youths, glad of the hiatus, watched with casual interest as the shasvre supervisor conducted a bemused conversation with the communicator on his cheek.

Its impractical, he declared, apparently addressing the open air. No. Well, yes, of course I appreciate that, but todays exercises are uncompleted an Who? Oh. Oh, I see. He swivelled briefly to regard Kais, one eyebrow lifting subtly. Yes, hes here. Very well.

The other youths, following their mentors gaze, turned their inquisitive faces to stare. An interruption of this nature was entirely unprecedented.

Kais? the old warrior grunted, features etched by a lifetime of Taus relentless sunshine glare. Its your father. Hes come to visit.

Blip.

Another digit disappeared from the round-cornered countdown panel on the wall, its sudden absence sucking on Kaiss attention and plucking him lightly from his memories. He risked a guilty glance around the interior of the

dropship, checking that none of his fellow warriors had spotted his lapse into reverie. Seated in rows along either wall of the windowless transit hold, supported by padded deployment seats with gently curving restraints, the others seemed as preoccupied as he was.

The dropship, an Orca-class shuttle with ample room for his entire hunter-cadre, made no noise. Somehow, Kais decided, that was worse. Somehow things might be better, easier, if the craft juddered and corkscrewed, battered by unforgiving turbulence and afflicted by all the horrors of unreliable technology the tau so stringently avoided.

If, perhaps, each fluted bulkhead was something other than perfectly sealed and rigorously tested, or if the ships stabilisers were less accurate, or the carefully moulded deployment seats less comfortable. If there were noises to distract him, discomforts to irritate him, minor inefficiencies to prey upon his nerves

If, if, if.

If the plummeting vessel were anything other than perfect, sleek, silent and utterly efficient in every way then perhaps he wouldn't be sitting there desperately trying to avoid the thought that was fighting for prominence in his mind.

Im going to die out there.

He closed his eyes and wrestled his awareness back to the battledome on Tau.

His father arrived with a retinue, of course.

The entry portal yawned open to reveal six shasla line warriors, moving with the feline confidence and grace that Kais was already beginning to recognise in his young shassaal classmates. Their domed helmets swivelled left and right, wary of hidden dangers. On each figure's left shoulder a gently curving torso guard caught the auditorium's apex-light and blazed, the elegant symbol of his homeworld Tau and, coincidentally, of the fire caste pronounced sharply in vivid white. Kais found himself unable to look away from the circular icon, fascinated and daunted that such simple geometry could supposedly represent his life, his legacy, and his role within the universe, all at once.

Finally satisfied with the security of the location, and barely even glancing at the young trainees arranged nearby, the warriors lowered their long pulse rifles and stood at ease. Reacting to some unseen command, the portal opened again and Kais's father stepped through.

Shaso Tau Shiur Commander of the Fifth Ten-Cadre, hero of Uorla, favoured disciple of Aunshi, thrice prevalent in Trials by Fire and honoured with the appellation Strong Triumph at the battle of Fiovash was not nearly

as tall as Kais had remembered.

He hadn't seen his father in three taucyrs: a long time, even by the detached standards of the fire caste. In the literature and imagery that filtered its way into the training facility, OShiur was typically seen clad in his colossal battlesuit, striking a pose against the pied skyline of some alien world. The porhui media bolstered his legendary reputation, oozing rhetoric upon his defence of the tau empire and his efforts to carry its creed to the as-yet unenlightened races of the galaxy. He was a hero, plain and simple, and Kais had lived beneath his shadow since he could remember.

And now here he was, as unavoidable in life as was his image in the media. A medium-sized individual with unremarkable features: skin the pale grey-blue of his caste, nasal cavity a slash of perfect symmetry bisecting his brow, broad upper jaw and jutting chin entirely consistent with average fire caste features. He was somewhat lean, perhaps, but certainly not the muscled giant that stalked Kaiss nightmares, frowning and condescending, criticising everything he did. He wore simple combat fatigues, embroidered in places with small stripes of rank and caste. Kais thought he looked old. Old and tired.

A chime sounded, breaking the expectant tension of the dropships hold. Kais glanced at the drop-commander seated nearby, half dreading the significance of the signal.

Shasel Tau Lusha, his scarred brow creased, seemed just as lost to the dangers of introspection as Kais had been. Only at the sounding of a second chime did the commander blink and peer around the hold, his frown dissolving. Kais felt reassured by his calmness, as if serenity were somehow infectious.

Five raikors, first group, he grunted, glancing at a readout beside him. Final checks.

The troopers obediently began examining weapons and combat gear, tightening servo clasps on armour plates, double-checking ammunition loads and polishing the already spotless optic clusters glaring from their crested helmets.

Kais appreciated the thoroughness. The group had been combat-ready for three decs already: a tortuous period of troubled imaginings and expectations, the malignant seeds of self-doubt growing and gnawing at each trooper. For many this would be their first real combat mission, a baptism of uncertainty and violence. Any last-moment wargear maintenance was entirely redundant, but at least it occupied their minds. Kais applied himself to the task with gusto, glad of the distraction.

Directly opposite, Vhol clucked his tongue in unconscious frustration at

some imagined imperfection in his rifle. Deriving from the distant sept of Dyanoi, the stocky trooper was a constant source of amusement amongst Kaiss comrades, forever scrutinising the minutiae of technology like some misplaced member of the earth caste. His homeworld had a reputation for rusticity and the squad rarely let him forget it, nicknaming him Fioshas the worker-warrior.

By contrast, the trooper to Kaiss left seemed utterly uninterested in inspecting her gear. Ju, her cadaverous features even paler than normal, sat with eyes closed and lips moving soundlessly, forming some rhythmic mantra or other. Ever since Kais could remember, Jus spiritual intensity had irked the other warriors, forever espousing the sanctity of the tauva and holding forth with whatever philosophical nugget shed most recently picked up. It wasn't that the other rookies begrudged her faith in the Greater Good; rather that the tauva philosophy of collective progress had permeated every part of the young line warriors training, and her inclination to preach was regarded as a waste of energy and breath. Despite the collective apathy towards Ju, both he and Yhol had become her firm friends.

Kais peered at each of them in turn, grateful for their presence. Thirteen taucyrs had passed since his fathers visit to the training dome; in all that time only Yhol and Ju, each in their own way as different as himself, had continued to treat him with the same familiarity and ease hed enjoyed before his fathers identity had become public knowledge. In the eyes of all the others Kais could feel only the weight of expectation, as if greatness should be somehow constituent in his blood.

But he also felt something more, something worse: it was the cold, quiet glimmering of disappointment, and hed seen it before.

* * * * *

OShiur approached the young tau with a clipped gait, eyes flitting from face to face with insect precision, analysing, committing to memory, then moving on. The shasla retinue moved with him, a living mantle of jutting weapons and lenticular optics. He was searching.

Kais fought hard against the sudden desire to step out of line and declare Me! Its me! Im your son! Somewhere in his gut a muscle contracted, spasming nervously, and he wobbled imperceptibly in his spot, terrified of falling over. All the time a tiny voice in the back of his mind reminded him that maybe, just maybe, his father would recognise him despite the taucyrs of growth and change, and greet him with the pleasure such a reunion surely deserved.

OShiurs lip curled and he eyed the supervisor.

Which one is he? he grunted. Kais deflated inside.

That one. The shasvre nodded in his direction.

His father stared at him for what seemed an eternity, then appeared to glide forwards, blotting the apex-light from Kaiss eyes and filling his vision with old, analytical inquiry made flesh. He respectfully lowered his gaze, fighting his jangling nerves.

Kais, OShiur said, almost softly.

The urge to look up was too strong. Father and son made eye contact for a brief moment before Kais looked away, feeling wretched and flayed by the older taus gaze. Flesh could disintegrate beneath such a stare, he imagined. All the far-fetched rhetoric of the media could become truth in an individual such as this. He bit his tongue and wished the sands at his feet would rupture and devour him, hiding him away from those expectant, critical eyes.

How does he progress? his father said, presumably speaking once more to the shasvre. Kais felt exposed, an exhibit to be prodded and discussed, unworthy of interaction. The shasvres faltering reply was crudely diplomatic.

He is able, Shaso. Able indeed.

Able?

Kais felt the pause like the end of the world. He knew the Shasvre wouldnt lie, could already taste the humiliation.

Yes, Shaso. Adequate.

But his dedication to the tauva is commendable, I daresay? He excels?

The shasvre mouthed wordlessly, then sighed. He is a little impetuous, perhaps.

Impetuous? OShiurs disapproving voice was a leaden bell ringing in Kaiss ears, tolling out across his private world of shame.

Yes, the shasvre went on, apparently resigned to total candour. Given to tempers, Shaso. Changes in mood and focus. But he is still young. Perhaps we mi

Is this true, boy?

Kais forced himself to look up again. His fathers eyes burnt themselves onto his memory, smouldering with distaste and disappointment, crystallising the world, shattering everything in his life and filling it instead with only the acidity of that unrelenting, unforgiving, unimpressed gaze.

Yes, Shaso, he mumbled, barely able to form words.

His father stood and stared, hooves tapping at the sand. He grunted under his breath twice, clearly fighting his dissatisfaction in an attempt to articulate.

We are told, he began, forming words thoughtfully, that there is a place for everyone in the tauva, regardless of their inadequacies. One merely need find ones niche. Kais could hear the disbelief in the voice, falsifying its reassurance; all the rhetoric in the world couldnt erase those disappointed

eyes from his memory.

Here. OShiurs calloused hand thrust itself into his vision, clutching a small display wafer. A gift.

Kais took it, numbly. The world was dead. It didnt matter.

His father left, the retinue of warriors drifted away like mist and the training began again. The silent dome stared down in mute judgment, the sand rose in miniature explosions with every footfall, and everything was normal.

Only at rotaa-end did he dare to examine the wafer. It was a small litany, written by his father in his own clipped, angular hand. It read:

My son,

No expansion without equilibrium.

No conquest without control.

Pursue success in serenity

And service to the tauva.

With pride.

Shaso Tau Shiur

That night, after staring at the words for long, sleepless decs, Kais dreamed of falling into an endless abyss, and whenever he swivelled towards the surface all he could see was a pair of dark, disenchanted eyes, glaring down at him.

Two raikors.

ElLushas terse proclamation jolted Kais from the reverie. He found himself unconsciously clutching at the utility pack clipped to his belt, feeling the familiar shape of the old display wafer through its thin material.

He knew his reluctance to discard the token was sentimentality of the worst kind: treasuring such a bauble long after its text had been committed to memory smacked of impracticality, utterly in violation of the principles of the Greater Good. Still, it exerted some form of impossible gravity upon him he could no more throw it away than he could believe himself worthy of its lesson.

Satisfied that the wafer remained in its accustomed position, Kais glanced around the dropship. From across the hold ElLusha stared at him with a sort of quiet amusement, completely at odds with his grizzled, scarred features. Kais looked away.

Helmet checks, the commander grunted. One-on-one.

Kais turned to find a partner quickly, grateful for the distraction. A hand landed heavily on his shoulder.

Here, Shasla. Ill do it. ElLusha stood over him, the same quiet smile

creasing the corners of his mouth.

Thank you, Shasel. Kais mumbled, uncertain. He upended the helmet and lowered it over his head, feeling the familiar surge of sensory information as the faceplate made contact with his skin. The world opened up from a single speck of light, a horizontal explosion of colours and shapes overwritten by winking text brackets and analysis readouts.

You're LaKais, aren't you? Lusha's rasping voice enquired, hands firmly joining the clasps along Kais's spine. I checked.

Kais frowned, unsure how to react. Why should a shasel know his name? Unless

I knew your father.

And there it was again: that crystallisation of reality, crumbling his senses and filling him with the certainty of his own worthlessness: all he was and would ever be was a reflection, and a faint one at that, of his father.

He was a great warrior, Lusha continued, knuckles rapping the base of Kais's neck in a final test of the helmet's seal. I served with him for many taucyrs. I was with him on Falshia when the Yhe came. I mourned his death.

Kais replied without thinking. I didn't know him well.

Immediately he regretted it, chastising his own lack of respect. If Lusha noted the overfamiliarity he gave no indication of it, nodding sagely.

I don't think anyone did, he said, thoughtful.

A set of digits in the corner of Kais's vision blurred towards zero, an interface with the dropships' systems reminding him visually of the vessel's meteoric descent. Lusha was still staring at him.

Thank you, Shasel, Kais mumbled, indicating his helmet seals, this time careful to observe the commander's caste-and-rank epithet. Should I check yours?

Lusha shook his head with a small frown. My thanks, trooper, but no. I'm staying aboard, apparently. Shasartol command doesn't like its officers getting their hands dirty if they can possibly help it. He shook his head again, muttering beneath his breath.

Kais said nothing, sinking back into his deployment seat in astonishment at ElLusha's open disapproval of his own superiors. Had a shasla ever dared express such sedition they could be guaranteed an intensive course in mental correction at the very least, not that any were foolish enough to do so.

First combat? Lusha grinned. I can always tell.

Yes, Shasel. Kais wrung his hands together, uncomfortable at the attention. He felt betrayed by his nerves, compelled somehow to prove his preparedness. But I've served four taucyrs already, Shasel. And the combat simulations at the training dome are

Ahh, simulations Lusha grinned, and four taucyrs of standing about

guarding porvres and porels, no doubt.

Kais nodded, embarrassed. Lusha chuckled.

Your father said something to me, once, he grunted, pursing his lips in thought. Might help you.

Kais frowned, uneasy at the prospect of hearing his fathers words from beyond the funeral pyre.

He fixed me with those eyes of his and he said, Young one Dont make the mistake of thinking youre ready for this. Then he opened the drop doors and out we went. Lushas face clouded, preoccupied by the memories.

You dont think us ready, Shasel?

No. I dont think its possible to be ready, LaKais. The best you can do is expect the worst.

Kais peered past the commander to his friends and comrades. Their postures betrayed them: each as anxious as he, unwilling to admit their fear to themselves. Somehow that knowledge was strangely reassuring. He wasnt alone with his terror.

Warriors! Lusha boomed, startling them. Attend! In half a raikor well be at deployment altitude! This is it! This is what you trained for! This rotaa you face your Trial by Fire. Do not expect it to be easy!

A light began to flash. The door into the drop deck gushed open and the padded restraints around each seat relaxed.

Muscles tensed. Teeth ground against one another.

Details are unimportant. Theres been an incident thats all you need to know. Remember your niche.

Remember your place. You are a cog in a machine! Ask no questions! Obey and concentrate!

Your mission is simple: engage and destroy. Conduct the montsel combat-pattern at all times; be swift and leave nothing alive. Theres a trench network at the citys perimeter, so spread out when youre down and clear the area. The crisis teams are setting down on the other side of the city, so dont expect any backup. Things are not going well down there. Lets turn the tide!

A chime sounded. The readout in Kaiss helmet counted away the moments implacably, refusing to slow or stop in answer to his shrieking nerves. His ears roared. Nothing was real.

Remain focused on the tauva! In unity lies progress! In harmony lies victory! Dont let yourselves down, Fire Warriors!

The ship shuddered. The hover thrusters rumbled to life. A fragmented thunderstorm raged beyond the hull.

A siren sounded.

Deployment positions, said Lusha.

There were nine, in total. Eight clutching guns, staring and sneering through the bars of the cage, and one bustling industriously amongst the instrumentation of the chamber.

They smelt bitter, an aroma as unvaried and unsubtle as it was unpleasant, so unlike the rich pheromone language the tau enjoyed. These creatures were a race of clones, pink, frail and moist.

Aunel Tau Kovash, secured behind adamantium bars, found himself searching for traces of artificial individuality with which to tell them apart: rank stripes, facial scars, tattoos. As an ethereal, the ruling caste of the tau race, it was his particular assignation in life to understand and appreciate the unity and the deficiency in all things. Nonetheless, before he'd ever encountered the guela, he'd never imagined a species so utterly ignorant of its own imperfections. The guela, he had quickly learned, were going to be trouble.

And now he found himself their prisoner, abducted in a storm of violence that he was still fighting to understand. It didn't matter. The reality of any situation was in its present, and in the now he was trapped. Helpless. An exhibit.

To Kovash, accustomed to the sweeping curvature and bright pallor of tau construction, his prison seemed unbearably grim. Given the lack of windows and the broad steps leading down to this low ceilinged space, he guessed he was incarcerated underground. The room itself was small and stifling, bordered by consoles and machinery, all typically guela in their rambling ugliness. Each of the eight soldiers faced his cage with an expression in as much as he understood guela mannerisms of intense disgust. One spat noisily.

Don't do that, idiot! barked a ninth, the coarse language quickly filtered and translated by the didactic learning modules the Aun, like all tau, had absorbed as an infant. From what little of it Kovash could see beyond its thick black cowl, this guela's face was a mass of twitching implants and sensors, copper wiring visible through its necrotic flesh. It jabbed a finger at the perpetrator, even now wiping spittle from his chin.

This is a sterile area!

The soldier appeared appropriately repentant until the black-cowl turned away, although Kovash entirely failed to interpret the bizarre hand gesture that followed. The ethereal was beginning to learn that such wasteful displays, utterly redundant in any constructive sense, were typical of his captors.

He made a decision. Opening his eyes fully, he dropped the facade of unconsciousness and rose to his feet in a single sweeping motion. The rush of shocked pheromones from each of the guela was, he didn't mind admitting, deeply gratifying. The black-cowl recovered first.

Well, well he muttered, hands rubbing together. A slight smile played across his metallic lips and he gestured vaguely at one of the soldiers, eyes not leaving Kovash. Contact Severus. Tell him our guest is awake. The soldier sprinted up the stairs, not looking back.

The robed human positioned himself before the cage and studied Kovash intently, rubbing his chin.

Well, he kept saying quietly, thinking to himself, well, well

Kovash had neither the patience nor the inclination to remain silent in the face of scrutiny. He leaned forwards slowly.

Who are you? he said, testing his abilities to articulate the guelas crude language. A second rush of astonished pheromones greeted his senses.

You speak Imperial? the black-cowl hissed, cable-strewn fingers clenching in surprise.

Kovash ignored the question, irritated by the guela tendency to state the obvious, and repeated: Who are you, human?

The face beneath the cowl leered. You're very well spoken for an abomination. I respect that.

Kovash merely stared, absorbing every shred of sensory information around him. The guela bowed with a sarcastic flourish, the bristling components of his face twitching excitedly.

I am Turial Farrachus, he said, Genetor primus of the Magos Biologis and Adept of the Officio Xenobiologica. I'm what you might call an enthusiast of all things tau.

Kovash nodded, mentally storing the name. As much as his helplessness galled him, his first instinct was to gather information. Conversation seemed the most probable source of answers. He dipped his head respectfully, deciding politeness would be his best tool, and declared: I am Aunel Tau Kovash.

Ah, yes, Farrachus purred, voice thick with insincere gravity. Let me see now. That would make you an Aun of the rank el, correct? The third highest, I think?

Fourth, Kovash interceded, interested in the guelas knowledge despite himself. Such basic factors of tau life were hardly secrets; surely these frail creatures didn't bring him here for this?

I stand corrected. Farrachus grinned. The central part of your name is your birthworld. What was it?

Tau.

That's it. And the last section is the given name, if memory serves. Ko-vaj, was it?

Kovash

The magos bowed flamboyantly again. A pleasure to meet you.

What is this place, Adept Farrachus?

Thats irrelevant, the man smiled, turning away to continue his inspection of a blinking datascreen. Consider yourself a guest of His Most Sacred Majesty, the Emperor of Mankind. I suggest you enjoy his hospitality while it lasts.

He selected a polished scalpel from a tray at his side and examined it pointedly. There was something almost amphibious to his features; the wide mouth and metal-infested skin spread in an ugly smile that derived, Kovash could clearly see, from his perceived seniority to those around him.

The ethereal refused to be cowed in the same way, staring disdainfully at the brandished scalpel. In truth, the didactic memories divulged little material regarding this Officio Xenobiologica, but the overtones were clear. Without a trace of arrogance Kovash was fully aware of his importance to the tau: to have fallen into the hands of beings as fiercely expansionist as the guela was nothing short of disastrous. He had no doubt that, at the first possible juncture, he would be tortured for whatever tactical knowledge he possessed. The shortsightedness of the guela was appalling.

Whispering a calming litany, he reminded himself that even the guela, in time, would come to embrace the tauva. All things would, eventually.

How did I come to be here? he purred, examining his memories for clues.

Hed been visiting the colony world Yukanesh when it happened; a riot of gunfire and madness that left his retinue pulverised and him gagging for air. He remembered the gas theyd used, curling through his mind and dampening every sensation. He remembered shouts and screams, then vast shapes in the fog hulking implacably forwards, then nothing.

My employer organised some mutual friends to fetch you. The human chuckled, not looking round. Hes most anxious to meet you.

Your employer?

Thats right. Well Our host, at any rate. Ultimately I serve a far greater cause, as do all of the Emperors flock.

Were not so dissimilar, then, Kovash trilled, testing him.

Youre quite wrong, Farrachus growled, smug features twisting with anger. He fiddled with the knife impatiently, testing its weight. Were worlds apart, you and I.

Perhaps. Perhaps not. Kovash waved an elegant hand dismissively, gratified at the ease with which these inefficient creatures could be goaded. Tell me What is your Emperor?

Farrachuss eyes flashed angrily. How dare you speak his name? Ill not tolerate *xenos* sullyng his purity.

Kovash tilted his head, undeterred by the insult. Nonetheless the question stands. What is he?

He is the purity of mankind. Our light and our guide. I wouldn't expect an abomination to understand!

Would you say, then, that he represents the whole of your race?

Of course! We live and die to serve him!

And in so doing, you serve all *guela*?

The adept's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Where are you going with this, alien?

Kovash allowed a serene smile to play across his lips. The greater power that I serve, he said, teaches us that in service to our race, we contribute to the Greater Good. Are your Emperor and my *tauva* truly so different?

That's enough, the man growled, all vestiges of humour discarded.

You called yourself an enthusiast of the *tau*, Kovash persisted, so you must know of the *tauva*. You must know we seek to unite all things for their mutual benefit, not to destroy them? We are no threat to you, unless provoked.

You will be *quiet!* the human barked, brandishing the scalpel.

We are no threat to you, and yet you hold me against my will. You must see the illogic of it.

Farrachuss advance halted, and his mouth curled with cruel humour once more. I told you why you are here, he hissed. My master was anxious to speak with you. You have so much to discuss together.

Whoever he is, he can't imagine that I'll tell him anything important.

Forgive my scepticism, alien. I've heard those words said before.

I'll die before I betray the *tauva*.

You would do well to forget whatever xeno gibberish you believe. Farrachus growled. It won't help you any longer. And if you think I'll let you die before you've co-operated, you're quite, quite mistaken.

He chuckled, turning back to the instrument panels, sweaty fingers caressing the knife's hilt.

The wait on the drop deck was significantly shorter.

The deployment doors melted open to reveal a smoke-blotted patch of dust and mud below. The first few warriors, crouched in readiness, shuffled agitatedly, knuckles tightening on rifles.

Early morning gloom raced by beneath, the first tentative splashes of light from the rising sun streaking the smoke and sand. Dolumar IV was a bleak world even when seen from above, and Kais glared morosely at the rocky wastes as they drew inexorably closer.

An altimeter chimed. The droplight turned green and the fire warriors in front of him began to tumble out into the haze.

Kais's leg muscles bunched, smoke and dust churning past them into the drop deck. He took a breath, swallowed hard, and jumped.

Lieutenant Alik Kevla waved forwards the ragged remnants of his squad and advanced towards the next blind corner of the trench system. More of the alien vessels were bleeding out of the skies with every moment, filling the air with the awful shriek of their engines. Mind still burning with fury at the lucky airstrike that had wiped out half of his squad scant minutes before, he cursed every inhuman abomination that ever dared draw breath within the Emperors divine realms and gripped his lasgun to his chest.

Theyd come from nowhere, unprovoked and unannounced, but by the grace of the Throne theyd regret the day they came to this world!

Landing craft, he snarled, peering cautiously around a corner at the pair of bulbous shuttles hovering nearby. They tilted downwards shallowly, as if sniffing at the dust, great plumes of haze lifting around their engines. Kevla turned to his squad with a growl. Not one of them lives that walks on the Emperors soil. You understand? *Not one!*

They chorused their assent, sharing his anger. None of them held any great fondness for this world or its people, but theyd be damned before they saw a single godless xenogen sullyng the sanctity of an Imperial world. Kevla nodded, satisfied at their resolve, and broke cover.

Dolumar IV was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a well-developed world. The spaceport was Hide more than a cluster of limpet buildings and a field of rockcrete, the major city Lettica a haphazard arrangement of rock and steel and the population little more than a captive army of workers.

All through the day and night the smelting factories churned away, disgorging their noxious emissions and shattering any hope of a moments silence. The agriculture projects had all died within a few years of the first colonists arrival; only the relentless machines, grinding away eternity in a fugue of molten metal and weld sparks, gave the planet any sense of purpose now.

Dolumar was a weapon world. Eating itself from the inside out, its overseers kept a constant stream of impure metallic nuggets spilling onto rickety, steaming conveyors; churning out the oiled, brittle killing tools of the Imperial Guard. Give it enough time and Letticas factories would cover its entire surface another forge world to birth the war machines of the Imperium.

Little wonder the Departmento Munitorum had chosen to garrison the planet with such a high density of guardsmen. Four entire regiments were, even now, scrambling to respond to this unannounced alien threat.

Lieutenant Kevla sneered as he darted forwards, reassured by the war cries of the men hot on his heels. Yes, he told himself, these tau had made a grave mistake in targeting Dolumar.

Which was when twenty rounds of burstcannon fire shredded Lieutenant

Kevla and his small squad in a cataclysm of detonating flesh and half-lived screams.

Briefly, Kais flew.

When it rose up to meet him, the ground seemed impossibly solid. The earth impacted against his hooves with an astonishing lurch, jarring through his legs. He stumbled, regaining his balance in a clumsy spray of dust and rock. More troopers piled out behind him, scattering towards the myriad trench openings nearby. Thick with haze and smoke, his first impressions of the planet were uniformly cluttered, crudely constructed trench walls snaking away towards the distant angles and towers of the guela city.

Even over the scream of the dropships engines, with miniature cyclones of dust fountaining all around him, Kais could hear the unmistakable rattle of burstcannon fire. The multi-barrelled weapon mounted on the nose of the dropship came to life with a hungry buzz, its bright strobe fire dazzling him. By the time his disordered thoughts were settled enough to wonder at the weapons intended target, all that remained was a ragged cluster of shapes, crumbling and dissolving before his eyes.

It took Kais long, ugly raikans to realise that the red mist hanging in the air was guela blood. Somehow he'd expected them to have water pumping through their moist bodies, fuelling their plump, pink muscles and sloshing through their vacuous inner spaces. The vibrancy of their fluids was startling. The bodies slumped awkwardly as the burstcannon shut off, smoke gushing from its barrels, rotations slowing lazily.

And then the explosions started, and the smoke lifted, and hell opened up before him. The sky was a patchwork of pulsefire and tracer streams, arcing magnificently between unseen ordnance and unseen target. Perfect troi-petal detonations rippled open from horizon to horizon, sending out questing tentacles of shrapnel, churning the already frothing air in ranks of airborne metal and fire. A phalanx of Barracudas howled overhead, riding the storm of smoke and chaos; a tawny blur of pastel and black against the overcast pall. Enemy fighters gusted after them, weapons chattering.

Kais absorbed it all in stunned fascination, oblivious to the fire warriors sprinting past him. A voice in his head snapped him to attention sharply.

All hands clear, it barked. Secure the area and advance into the trenches.

Kais glanced around, surprised to find himself alone. His comrades armoured forms melted through the haze, pulling away from the hovering vessel towards the cover of the trenches. A second dropship, similarly poised, was settling nearby, no doubt preparing to disgorge its own cargo of troopers.

Kais focused on a pair of his comrades and stumbled after them, mind still reeling. Gunfire fought with the howl of the shuttle engines, jostling for his

attention. The bright flash-flare of distant airstrikes patterned him with light and shadow, thick mushrooms of smoke pillaring upwards above the walls of the trench. On every side the mangled crudity of guela engineering affronted his eyes: haphazard bridges crisscrossing the channels with buckling scaffold struts, half-crumbled pillboxes overlooking each meandering twist in the sandbag corridors.

It was madness, and he gagged to find himself at its centre.

The two warriors sprinted ahead before he could catch them up, ducking beneath a wide platform that straddled the trench. Kais recognised the squat physique of the shasla on point: a female named Kethrit who had trained with him on Tau. The other he didnt know.

The pair stepped around the nearest corner and flew apart, las-fire knocking ugly chunks from their armour.

Kethrits head jolted backwards with a snap, a pale jet of cyan blood hanging limpid in the air before scrawling itself across the trench wall. The other trooper fragmented at the limbs and neck as his chest absorbed a volley, slumping in a fractured heap.

Kaiss momentum carried him on, too astonished by his comrades strangled death throes to even think. By the time something approaching reality assembled itself in his mind it was too late to stop, too late to regret the rashness of the assault, too late to recite the Siot mediation of the Shaslenra the Cautious Warrior. His legs betrayed him, carrying him past Kethrits jerking form and into the path of whatever had killed her. The scent of her blood was overpowering.

He dropped a knee to the floor, operating on instinct, panicked and automatic actions taken without a thought passing his mind. Grit and fabric exploded from the sandbag wall at his back, las-blasts at head height harmlessly shredding the air above him. He raised the rifle, isolating a shape from the swirling mélange of visual madness, and squeezed the trigger. Something shrieked and crumpled to the ground, legs kicking and flailing dumbly.

Kais watched the guela for a long time, wishing it would realise it was dead.

Korvre Rann Tpell, ensconced within the comfortable confines of the second shuttles cockpit, nodded in satisfaction at the sensor displays. Glancing at the concave grid of viewscreens before her, she noted that her sister vessel had finished deploying its cargo of fire warriors and was beginning to lift clear. Nodding, she finalised her smooth descent with practiced ease and tapped at a control, remotely informing the deck officer that disembarkation could begin.

The controls before her could hardly be more intuitive: finely balanced

level gauges, pitch and roll tracker spheres, directional touchpads on hovering drones, all within easy reach of her slender arms, themselves a physical trait common to all the spaceborn tau of the air caste. It was a design of perfect ergonomic arrangement, a symbiosis of pilot and vessel, and she never failed to spare a respectful thought for whatever earth caste fioel had designed it.

The doors are open, Korvre, her korui assistant trilled, concentrating hard on regulating the hover thrusters.

Tpell clucked her tongue in acknowledgement, daring to relax her tense muscles. Thus far the troop deployment had been a complete success.

As if overhearing her thoughts, the dropships Al chimed in with a sonorous announcement. General alert, it warned, voice lifeless and cold. Enemy ordnance seeking lock. Gridzone 3-5-2.

Tpell hissed and forced herself to remain calm, fixing her eyes upon the appropriate viewscreen. Sure enough, a lumbering vehicle on dust-choked tracks, venting clouds of smoke, lurched along the rim of a nearby trench and swivelled its turret inexorably in her direction. Tpell stabbed at the burstcannon auto-track control and held her breath.

The two weapons fired together.

For the briefest fraction of a raikan, Tpell was convinced she could see the artillery shell ripping through the air towards her. Then the dropship shuddered, the viewscreens flickered to darkness, and everything turned to fire.

* * * * *

Kais was retracing his steps, intent upon regrouping with others from his cadre, when he spotted the tank. It squatted on the bank above the trench enormously, gunmetal flanks as chipped and stained as any of the guela technology hed seen thus far. Glaring at it from below with a cynical eye, he doubted the vehicles efficacy as a threat to his comrades. He was quickly forced to reassess.

The cannon fired, its roar shuddering through the air and lifting a layer of dust and sand from the trench floor.

Like an angry creature spasming its muscles to shed the parasites infecting its skin, the ground clenched and shuddered. Something nearby detonated, and Kais lost his footing at the rush of Shockwaves that followed. Scrabbling in the sand, he dragged his gaze painfully towards the end of the trench, where boiling gouts of smoke and dust lurched skywards. One of the dropships had been hit, toroq-side engine blown to shreds.

The comm erupted in shouts and screams and the world went white.

Burstcannon pulses punched craters in the trench-walls around Kais,

knocking lumps of molten metal from the guela tank above his head and sending him scrabbling for cover. The tank rolled onwards in spite of the firestorm, attempting to negotiate the bridge that spanned the trench.

second dropship going down

near the site! Get to cover

Trailing a plume of superheated fuel, continuing to spit a hail of pulsefire at the tank even as it foundered, the dropship hit the ground and dragged itself in an ugly arc. Dust churned upwards, obliterating the shrieks from the communicator and blocking Kais view. The last thing he saw was the other shuttle, the one he'd been deployed from, pulling away to the left as its dying sister-vessel gyrated in a fiery circle, heaving smoke and flame into the dust storm.

Shredded by the burstcannon, the scaffold bridge collapsed.

Spewing its mechanical innards, venting fire from the wounds all over its hull, the guela tank nosedived into the trench in a cascade of rock and oil, dragging with it the ruined skeleton of the bridge. The trench walls crumbled, smearing themselves across the devastation.

Scrabbling clear of the tumbling wreckage, Kais thought of the guela trapped inside the vehicle, wounded and baking, wondering why the access hatch wouldn't open, slowly suffocating in the dark. Guiltily, aware of the unattractive sentiment of it, he thought: Good.

Rising up beyond the wreckage, thrusters faltering, the remaining dropship wobbled into the sky.

General address! his comm announced, startling him. This is ElLusha. The drop site is no longer safe! All troopers regroup! I'm sending new coordinates now. Make your way to the pick-up site and await further instructions.

Kais felt panic gripping him, glancing around in the futile hopes of spotting other shaslas. ElLusha, he transmitted, voice growing faster and louder as his terror betrayed him, t-this is LaKais. I don't think I can regroup. The trench is blocked. I can't see any of the others! I don't know what to do.

LaKais. The voice was maddeningly calm, a leaden slab that arrested his panic before it consumed him. LaKais, you must focus.

He forced himself to breathe, grinding his teeth together until the horror subsided. He hung his head, ashamed of himself. My apologies, Shasel.

Listen to me: the rest of the cadre is scattered on the other side of the dropsite. They're regrouping, but they're too far clear of your position.

Shasel? I-I don't understand.

I'm sorry, LaKais. You'll have to advance to the extraction point alone.

T-there aren't any others? His voice was quiet, not ready to believe itself. Without even thinking, his hand clutched for the shape of the display wafer in

his belt pouch.

None, Shasla, came Lushas grave reply. Theyre making their own way.

Im alone, then he murmured, more to himself than his commander.

No, Shasla. *Not* alone. No tau ever is you know that.

Kais breathed deep, unable to find any comfort in Lushas words.

The disembodied voice continued with a sigh. You should be receiving those co-ordinates now. A row of characters blinked to life in the corner of his HUD. He stared at them morosely, aware of the distance involved.

You can do this, Kais.

He watched the ship clamber into the smoke, suspecting that with it went his hopes of survival.

Yes, Shasel.

Nico Junz was scared. He didnt mind admitting it. Being a coward was something hed learned to live with long ago, refining it into a virtual art form. Now he relied upon his innate sense of terror to keep him alive.

That was the principle, at any rate.

Hed flourished amongst the grunts of the 19th Glamorgian regiment thanks wholly to his literacy. His weapon skills were negligible and any one of his comrades could, had they wanted to, pound him into the ground. But could any of them compose letters to their families, or read prayers to pass the time on guard duty? Could any of them make equipment manifestos or help the captain administer the armoury? Of course not. Being a coward was one thing, but being a *useful* coward was entirely another. Life, if not good, was at least easy.

And then, arcing out of the morning sky like a hail of meteors, the tau had come.

Suddenly nobody had the time to write letters, the captain was too busy shouting orders and killing things to worry about expenses, and the armoury, as of fifteen minutes ago, was a smoking crater. So yes, he was scared. Scared and, even worse, completely and utterly useless.

The ceiling of the tight bunker, empty but for Nico, Captain Reicz and a communications servitor, vibrated in response to some explosion outside, dust misting downwards. Nico whimpered under his breath.

Quiet, Reicz snorted, turning back to lean over the servitors shoulder. Nico, pressed against a wall in an attempt to remain clear of the captains fraying temper, regarded the ghoulish thing with a shudder. Once a living human, now its dead features were riddled with mechanical apparatus and twitching components, logic engines replacing its cauterised brain. Its necrotic flesh tightened in concentration as it listened to the comm-feed from the sensor array on the bunkers roof.

Tau transmission intercepted it hissed, dead eyes long since rotted away and replaced by glowing optics. Attempting to translate now

Its myriad fingers, branching horrendously from every part of its hands and wrists, began manipulating the gears and clattering logic devices on the console before it, every now and again pausing to tilt its head at some particularly hard-to-translate phrase. Reicz bent over it, watching the flickering display screen as the garbled message was deciphered. Nico felt himself creeping nearer, intrigued despite himself.

Bastards the captain breathed, dismayed by the message. Sneaky alien bastards

Nico had just spotted the words deception and delay from amongst the glowing text when something clattered loudly on the rockcrete above his head, then roared like a hundred thunderstorms. The whole bunker shook.

Nico dived to the ground with a shriek, curling in a whimpering ball as the ceiling splintered and dust rained down from above. Reicz regarded the damage with rather more decorum, angrily glaring upwards. As if mewling for his attention, the console whined painfully, then shut down with a protracted hiss. The screen flickered and went black.

What happened? Reicz demanded.

The servitor twitched and chattered, eyebrows dipped in confusion. Comm link severed it reported helplessly. External channels dead.

Sir? Nico quailed, pulling himself upright with helpful eagerness. Whats wr

They bombed us! he roared furiously, hunting for someone to vent his anger at. He grabbed Nicos lapels and bellowed into his face. The bastards knocked out our comms, you idiot!

Nico cringed. Helpful was clearly not a wise career move. The captain dropped him and scratched his chin, furious.

I need a line to Command!

The servitor shook its head with a vacant rattle. Reiczs lip curled.

You, he snarled. Nico looked up and found a gloved finger aimed at his face. M-me?

Get to the command post. Tell them I know what the xenos are doing.

Wha

Quiet. Listen. Theyre drawing our fire. Lettica isnt the target.

But, sir

Shut up! Its a diversion! Its a warp-damned diversion, you hear me? The prison. You tell them! You tell Command from me theyre going after the prison!

Nicos mind did a backflip. Wh

Reicz glared. Run!

The whimpered complaint in Nicos throat curled up and died. A laspistol muzzle had appeared magically in front of his eyes.

He came to a sudden, adrenalin-fuelled decision. If there was one thing a professional coward was certain to be good at, it was running. He was out the door and sprinting before he knew it.

Kais drew a long breath and crept further along the trench. The oblique curves of the recessed corridors fractured and distorted every sound, making distances impossible to judge. Every gunfire report or roiling artillery impact was a potential threat, and every corner represented an opportunity for deadly surprises.

Behind him, one of the dead guela gurgled. They did that, hed quickly learned. They jerked and groaned and dribbled. Filthy.

His mind was unsettled: a storm of turbulence and dangerous excess. Hed seen and done so much in the few raikors since his separation from the cadre that he could barely think straight. Hed fought and sniped and shot. Hed punched holes through soft alien guts and cut short their blind, prejudiced little lives with no more effort than a trigger pull. Hed smelled their burning flesh, wiped their blood from his pale armour and listened, annoyed, to their shrieks and pleas. They were inefficient, he had decided.

In a corner of his mind, he wondered why he wasnt dead yet.

Along this small stretch of trenchway, dwarfed by the engagement raging all around him, Kais had learnt more about the Way of the Fire Warrior than twenty taucyrs in the battledome on Tau. It was enough to disquiet even the firmest, most stable mind.

But worse, worse even than extinguishing the lives of these brutal, impetuous creatures, was the suspicion creeping over him that he was just like them. He had discovered within himself a proclivity for killing, and it terrified him like nothing else.

The comm interrupted his thoughts. Kais, Lusha said, sounding strained. Kais, I want you to pay attention.

Yes, Shasel?

Theres a bunker ahead of you. You see it?

Kais peered along the winding trench, disquieted by his commanders ability to remotely view the feed from his helmet optics. All throughout his training hed been uncomfortable with the sensation: having someone else inside his eyes, staring out at his world without his permission, judging his actions from a distance.

I see it, he said, glaring at the rockcrete pillbox. Hed assumed it was deserted as he approached, a thick ebb of smoke lifting from its upper surface in silent testament to a recent airstrike. The mangled remains of a

communications array sagged piteously above it.

Listen, Lusha commed, Ive just had word from shasartol. Theyre concerned that the guela in that bunker might have intercepted some sensitive transmissions. Their equipment is more sophisticated than we thought.

I dont understand, Shasel.

You dont need to understand, LaKais. You just need to obey.

The rebuke rang hollow in Kaiss mind. He understood the convention of Shasla obedience and had even thought himself prepared to abide by it, but now he came to it he felt a powerful need for information. He craved knowledge of the situation, intensely uncomfortable with blind obedience.

Ju would have called it arrogance of the worst kind, he thought with a smile. In questioning orders he was betraying a distrust of his superiors and an unwillingness to allow others to make decisions for him. He quelled the subversive sentiments and bowed his head again, conscientiously attempting to conform.

Of course, Shasel. What are my orders?

Clear out the bunker, Shasla. Leave nobody alive. ElLusha out.

Kais listened to the silence of the comm-channel and breathed deeply.

Dont think about it, he told himself. Dont ask why, dont concern yourself. Just do it.

Not allowing himself time to agonise, he snatched a grenade from his utility belt, thumbed the trigger, and hurled it. Moments before it tumbled through the bunkers doorway a skinny guela leapt out into the trench, eyes wide in terror. The grenade skittered past him into the dark interior, and in a strangled expulsion of breath the guela leapt away, not even aware of the fire warrior standing three torleks from him.

Kais blinked. The whole thing had lasted moments.

The grenade detonated with a roar, lifting the top layers of dust from the bunker and forcing out the walls: a concrete belly spasming with shrapnel flatulence. Smoke and flesh vented unevenly through the doorway.

He peered inside cautiously, strangely unnerved by the ease with which hed commanded such devastation. Less than a dec ago he was awash with fear and confusion, bewildered by the strangeness and terror of it all. Now he was peering at the shredded remains of two bodies two more bodies with barely a jot of interest. They were just meat.

That soldier came Lushas terse voice in his ear. An orange icon blinked in his helmet display, distance tracker rising swiftly. You need to pursue him. He could be carrying a warning

What warning? Kais blurted, astonishing himself. He could feel the blood rushing to his face and bit at his tongue, furious with himself. He hadnt intended to vocalise the query that had bubbled impetuously in his mind, least

of all in such a disrespectful manner. His inability to contain rebellious thoughts had landed him in trouble before, and he prepared himself for the chastisement that would no doubt follow.

Lusha surprised him again, sighing wearily. Our deployment here was a distraction, Kais. Nothing more. Were drawing their troops away from our true objective.

A a distraction? Kais felt sick. He saw again the two fire warriors dissolving before his eyes, picked apart by relentless las-fire. He saw the spinning bulk of the shuttle, whirling out of control in a storm of dust and flame. He saw the death and insanity that had surrounded him since he set foot on this planet, a web of blood and smoke and horror. All part of an elaborate ruse. Just a distraction he repeated, unwilling to believe it.

Kais! Lushas voice was strained with impatience. Remember the machine. One people, one unity, one person. Youre a cog! Youre a component in a greater scheme, and if youre ordered to take part in a distraction, then by the One Path youll do it!

Kais lowered his head, the shame boiling in his mind. Yes, Shasel.

Good. The voice softened again, almost apologetic in its tone. Its never easy, Kais. I know that. Accept your place in the tauva and youll find your peace.

I will try, Shasel. Y-you have my apologies.

The guela soldier. He mustnt be allowed to raise the alarm. We think theres a command post nearby. Its possible hes heading for that.

I understand.

Good. Get after him.

The world hazed. Nico tried to breathe. The trenches grew wider as he approached Letticas northern outskirts, rising imperceptibly towards the welcoming cover of its squat buildings. Not willing to spend any time enjoying the sight, he glimpsed the distant rooftops through a haze of adrenaline and pushed himself onwards.

Dust, mud and blood caked his legs, a matted tangle of dry filth and moist gore. Twice hed slipped on burnt, unrecognisable bodies, breath expended in great dry heaves as gossamer strands of sticky flesh and sinew clung to his boots. He scrabbled upright through the wafting smoke clouds, muscles aching, not caring whether hed slipped in human or tau blood. He ran and ran and ran, stumbling and panting and gagging.

At some point he couldnt remember when the anaerobic gasps burning his lungs had transformed into a hissed litany.

oh Throne oh Throne oh Throne oh Throne

There was something following him. He hadnt risked a headlong tumble

by staring back over his shoulder, but his neck prickled with intuitive terror that he'd learnt to rely upon long ago. A coward without an innate sense of self-preservation was just a corpse.

Every now and again shapes appeared from the smoke haze hanging in the air. Friend or enemy, it didn't matter which; they vanished just as abruptly, memories obliterated by each new corner to the trench-way. The location of the command post was inscribed on his mind with crystal clarity; as he ran he imagined a pulsing red lifeline threading through the forks and rises of the channel network, leading him forever onwards. A tiny, secret voice in his mind began to whisper: *You're going to make it!*

He wouldn't let himself believe it.

From somewhere nearby a storm of weapons fire chattered at the air, and his legs carried him along like a dead weight, bent at the waist with his arms over his head. He ran the gauntlet blind, tripping and shrieking, certain that each step would be his last. A blue-white orb of pulsefire smouldered across his shoulder, singeing the cloth of his reggs and earning an anguished sob in response. In the last rational part of his brain he realised the wound barely even hurt, cauterised even as it was inflicted. That didn't stop him from screaming.

And then the madness was left behind, the explosions and crackling gunfire reports faded in his wake, the world seemed to slow and his feet, unbidden, staggered to a halt. Obscured by dust, alternately bombed out or merely smeared with soot, the buildings that jostled around him like protective molluscs were nonetheless the most wonderful sight he'd ever seen. Stifling a relieved sob, he stepped into the city and left the trenches behind.

Which was when the xeno that had been following him, optic sensor burning with reflected light, shot his left kneecap into a thousand tiny, spinning fragments.

Shasel Tau Lusha leaned over a hovering bank of viewscreens at the rear of the cockpit and scowled. The dropship *Tapran* had escaped major damage from the explosive convulsions of its sister vessel, though its juntas-side engine, now fluctuating annoyingly, had been marred by shards of debris. Lusha gritted his teeth at the lurching interruptions and fixed his eyes firmly on the grids screens.

In the course of his career he'd learnt to recognise the potential for greatness when he encountered it. In each aspect of the tauva was the confirmation of equality: the lowliest earth caste fiola, it espoused, was as vital to the continuing sanctity of the Greater Good as was the mighty Auno Kathlan himself, high in the fluted towers of the walled city on Tau.

Lusha understood that. Respected it. But still, once in a while there came

an anomaly. Plain for all to see, an individual unable to fit in, without the means or the patience to find their niche in the correct gradual fashion. In LaKais he could see skills beyond those of a mere shasla: his stealth and speed, his innate craving for tactical knowledge these things marked him out as plainly as did his impetuosity. Only the youths inability to accept his place in the present would prevent him from rising to greatness in his future.

Typically, even in the most meteoric of careers, there were incremental gaps of at least four taucyrs between each rank. One became a shasla upon graduation from the battledome, then a shasui, then a shasvre. An elite few became shasels and, in only the most exceptional cases, shasos. For Kais to achieve a status more in keeping with his abilities, he must exercise the one thing Lusha doubted he possessed: patience.

He peered at the sixteenth viewscreen and frowned. Kaiss helmet-feed was filled with the face of a guela soldier, writhing and screeching on the floor like some tyrannid yhevre. He wondered vaguely what LaKais was feeling, slowly raising his rifle to silence the pale creature. A readout beneath the monitor blinked red and began to rise in value: Kaiss pulse, growing faster. The youth was excited, Lusha realised, frowning uncomfortably.

The pulse rifle fired and the screen went red. Lusha looked away.

Shasel? the korvre pilot trilled from the apex of the cockpit, interrupting his thoughts. Were over the extraction point now. Should I begin the descent?

Lusha glanced at the other screens, a jumbled montage of different warriors views. The other survivors from the cadre were almost in position.

Yes, Korvre. Lets get them back.

The dropship broke cover amid the cloudbanks and began its stately descent, marred only by the occasional sputtering of the damaged engine. Lusha tapped a control and the grid of screens switched to an external view.

Something flickered in the ruins below, a guela turret gun spitting streamers of tracer-lit bullets towards the citys periphery. He wondered vaguely what it was shooting at.

Shasel? The pilot said, concerned. Theres something

The ship lurched violently, lifting Lusha off his feet and depositing him painfully on the floor. A squadron of drones hovered past, maintenance tools brandished.

Report, he demanded grimly, clambering to his feet.

A tank, the korvre stated flatly, voice admirably calm. No major damage. Im taking us back up, Shasel. It wont miss twice.

Lusha nodded, fighting his irritation. Expressions of annoyance were wasteful and inefficient, more characteristic of the frail guela than the tau. He imagined the humans inside the tank cursing loudly at their near miss and hardened his resolve. Such creatures were not worthy of the tauva, he

suspected, regardless of the forgiveness and tolerance the Auns preached.

He switched the screens back to the fire warriors personal helmet-feeds, sadly aware of how many had faded to darkness. Kaiss HUD was a frenzy of movement too fast for Lusha to interpret.

LaKais? he commed. Whats your status?

Kaiss voice sounded strained with effort. Standby, Shasel, he grunted, angry weapons fire crackling in time with the lightning-pulses on the screen. Its under control.

LaKais what do you mean?

The tumbling image began to resolve itself, oiled machinery catching the shifting smokelight. Kaiss gloved hands entered the viewframe, clenching down on a series of haphazard, rune-encrusted controls.

And then Lusha understood.

By the path the pilot gasped, staring at the sensors. Hes

Hes hijacked the turret gun, Korvre Lusha said, forcing back a smile.

Kais held a gloved hand against the guns blocky controls, reasoning correctly that at least one of them must be a trigger. At the mercy of the weapons ramshackle vibrations, he held on for dear life and tried to aim as best as he could.

This part of the city had been all but flattened in the tau attack, targeted by one of the colossal Dorsal-class bombers that had pre-empted the ground strike, he guessed. The vessels unthinkable aerial ordnances had devastated whatever had stood here before, leaving nothing but fragmented rockcrete and rising smoke. Hed found the turret gun at the blastzones edge; fixed to a sturdy iron pintle it had weathered the storm with only a layer of soot to show for its fiery baptism. Its crew, what charred fragments remained, had not been so lucky.

The tank had clambered over a nearby ridge, beetlelike, just as the comforting whine of the dropships engines met Kaiss ears. Standing beside the ungainly emplacement, staring in horror as the lumbering vehicle took careful aim at the descending shuttle, Kais was wrapping his fingers around the weapons controls before hed even had time to think.

Haifa raikor of noise and madness later, in which the dropship had come frighteningly close to destruction, the tank swivelled its cannon with glacial slowness in Kaiss direction. It advanced along the ruined street with juggernaut implacability, grinding rock and metal beneath its tracks.

The gun quaked in his hands, spent ammunition cartridges spinning past his head. Attempting to absorb the onslaught, a block of metal detached itself from the tanks hull, sparks and shrapnel capering away. The vehicle lurched in its place, squealing tracks protesting at the impact. More craters blossomed:

a process of metallic flaying in which gobbets of metallic flesh drizzled into the air. Buckling beneath the relentless barrage, fissures began to open in the devastated hull. With mere raikans to spare before the colossal cannon acquired its target, a fuel reserve ignited.

The vehicle heaved itself off the ground on a jet of flame, flipping over and shredding itself in a tangle of cabling and armour. A secondary explosion prised apart its midriff, hull fragments pirouetting through the air and smearing themselves across the ruined landscape. Slabs of wreckage gyrated and bounced, slicing the air. One of the crew screamed from somewhere at the heart of the madness. Briefly.

Kais watched the smoke lift for what seemed like a long time. When finally the ragged remnants of his cadre clambered from the trenches he was too exhausted to even greet them.

Barely half had made it back alive.

The shuttle came down and the cadre clambered aboard. Hell vanished behind a closing blast-door.

Sitting once again in his deployment seat, wondering about the perfect stillness of the vessel, Kais allowed his mind to rest. The other shaslas were silent. They too, he supposed, couldnt think of anything to say. He wondered if they felt like him. Hollow, somehow. Diminished.

II

06.O5 HRS (SYS. LOCAL DOLUMAR IV, Ultima Seg. #4356/E)

The governor was on his way to see his new pet.

He descended the stairs two at a time, a feral grin smeared across his face. The troopers arranged about the room snapped nervously to attention. He could feel their eyes tracking his movements, faces full of fascinated intimidation. They feared him. They revered him. His most trusted men, charged with keeping the presence of his xeno plaything a secret, and they were terrified of him.

Lord Meyloch Severus entered the holding room in a sweep of gaudy robes, polished baubles and gold-piped lapels, eyes glowing balefully. His footsteps, clipped and precise, echoed around the chamber like a fist cracking its knuckles, broken up and dislocated by the arrays of uneven machinery and ungainly technology infesting the walls.

The genitor from the Magos Biologis scurried forwards, ratlike, to greet him. Severus studiously ignored him and stepped towards the holding cell. The thing inside regarded him unflinchingly, pale robes adorned with intricate alien designs, subtle swirls and interlocking grids of colour barely even visible in the half-light. Severus found himself astonished by the creature's eyes, small and slanted, shadowed by the contours of its long skull and yet somehow full of acute, incisive intelligence. In the fanciful part of his mind he wondered whether such eyes as those couldnt see into the very soul.

Not my soul, hissed another, darker part of his mind. He smiled.

The adept, unable to hold his tongue any longer, coughed pointedly.

How's our guest? Severus growled, not bothering to look round.

My lord, the xenog

I am hungry, the alien purred, its voice a soft melody of musical vowels.

Severus could barely contain the giggle building in his throat. A talkative prisoner? he grinned. Well there's a first.

He called you my lord, the xeno said, tilting its head. Its single braided chord of hair, decorated with colourful bands of cloth and beading, hung delicately over its shoulder. It blinked. I think perhaps you are in charge, here. I think perhaps a mistake has been made. I wonder if you aren't aware that my people my race will not rest whilst I'm captive. I wonder if perhaps you've considered the ramifications of my imprisonment.

Severus chuckled. Well, I wonder, he slurred, enjoying himself, if perhaps

you're dropping spoor in terror at all the wonderful things I'm going to do to you. He didn't wait for a response, swivelling to glare at the adept. Get him downstairs. I want to acquaint him with our new toy.

Of course, my lord.

And keep him quiet. His voice annoys me.

An angry tremor rumbled through the floor. The speaker above the door, through a crackling layer of distortion, burst into life.

Governor? Governor Severus? Captain Praeter, sir.

Report.

It's the xenogens, my lord! They're here! They're attacking the prison!

Severus's smile widened. He fixed the caged ethereal with a gaze, regarding its temperature fluctuations with interest.

Well, he smiled, it's about time.

Lusha stared down through the dust and smoke-haze at the compound below. Anti-aircraft emplacements spat gobbets of soot towards the dropship, ugly ulcers of blackness speckling the sky.

Shasartol command were pleased, at least. The expenditure of life in attacking Lettica, they deemed, had been acceptable. Given the success with which the guela forces had been drawn away from the prison, Lusha suspected the supervising shaso was delighted.

Lusha had been watching young Kais, recovering in his deployment chair, when the debriefing came through. Shaso Sacea Udas, monitoring events from the orbiting warship *Ores Tashvar*, appeared in ceremonial dress on the wallscreens of the dropship to congratulate the warriors on a job well done.

He told them about Aunel Tau Kovash. He told them that the guela, unprovoked, had forcibly abducted the cherished ethereal. He told them how the abductors had been tracked by the finest air caste pilots to this backwater world. The loss of their comrades, he'd told them, was all part of the scheme, the plan, the monwerna: the deceptive assault.

Lusha couldn't help but think of Kaiss words, from down on the planet. Just a distraction? he'd asked, voice thick with betrayal and bitterness. Sitting there in the dropship as the shaso gave his inspirational speech, the youth had looked sick, expressionless features not masking the resentment in his eyes. In such subtle ways were the emotions of taukind expressed; not in the excesses and self-indulgences of the guela.

Lusha could well imagine the thoughts masked behind Kaiss empty expression, full of blood and fire and dead comrades. He wanted to tell the youth that they'd served the tauva, each in their way, but OUDas hadn't finished talking and the meditations upon loss would have to wait.

Now, the general had nodded, we must capitalise upon our success.

So the dropship had plunged again into Dolumars rolling cloudbanks, hanging low over its rocky wastelands in a surgical insertion of manpower.

A single unit, OUdas had insisted later, in private communication with Lusha. Any more and we risk alerting the enemy and then who knows what the barbarians would do? I daresay theyll kill the Aun immediately if we attempt a direct assault.

In the absence of any plan more likely to succeed Lusha had bowed to his superiors decisions, as the tauva demanded, but couldnt bring himself to be happy with them.

So now he found himself crouched before the gaping deployment doors, watching again as the remnants of his cadre leapt away into the dust and smoke, dodging between gaping shell blasts and long-range death at the hands of guela snipers. Other dropships circulated nearby, themselves disgorging serried ranks of shaslas and shasuis onto the swirling dust, figures picking their way through the haze in the shadow of the guela prison.

The very existence of an edifice designed solely for the incarceration of the socially incompatible was beyond Lushas understanding. On Tau those few who failed to conform were considered worthy of sympathy and help, not punishment. He dismissed again the illogic of their conventions and regarded the brooding construct dispassionately. It was an obscene blot; a cancerous assemblage of haphazard turrets and towers, tiered and arranged without efficiency or beauty. It was a shattered knuckle, thrust from the desert in a brutal pile of jutting weapons and walls. It lurked massively in the rocky depression beyond Letticas western boundary, and Lusha mused sourly that one might as well hurl snowballs into volcanoes as assault such a fortress with rifles and grenades.

The shaso was repeating his tactic: get their attention, make a fuss, make them forget to look for less obvious threats. Monwerna. So: a single unit to infiltrate and rescue, whilst the cadres drew attention and fire.

Lusha could have deployed a shasui for the task, or even a shasvre. Hed considered the possibility carefully; ultimately wondering whether experience would provide any real benefit in this circumstance. A veteran could be relied upon to do their duty with as much efficiency and haste as possible, dispassionate, effective and mechanical. Lushas experiences, learned the hard way in the heat of more battles than he cared to remember, told him that sometimes efficiency and duty would never be enough.

He remembered watching the pulse-rate indicator on the viewscreen, climbing steadily higher as the adrenaline flowed and the excitement burgeoned. He rubbed his jaw, wondering if hed sent the right warrior. The young shasla, fixing him with his fathers gaze, had been *insistent*

The sentry gun fizzed and hung limp, pulsefire blowing open its turntable and shedding its metallic guts across the tunnels floor. Kais drifted past it, a wraith wearing every shadow like a cloak.

A high-altitude survey drone had provided the subterranean topography for his infiltration mission, now imposed iconically at the foot of his HUD. A complex mélange of radiation echosensors and temperature gauges had located a natural sinkhole in the desert, terminating mere torleks from a service tunnel beneath the prison compound. After leaping from the dropship with his heart hammering at his insides, Kais had achieved access with an auto-deploy charge and an awkward struggle through the resulting fissure.

A guard, investigating the crippled sentry guns clattering protests, dropped to his knees with a neat hole through his forehead. Kais reloaded and crept onwards, thinking of his comrade Yhol.

His closest friend. Uncomplicated and good humoured, hed regarded Kais with a respect and familiarity hed never expected to regain following his fathers visit to the battledome. And now he was dead. Lying in pieces somewhere, probably. Knocked apart by a grenade, or sliced into wafer fragments by a chattering lasgun. Gobbets of his flesh and bone riddling the flame-gutted trenchways.

Just a diversion.

Kais hadnt even noticed his friends absence, to his eternal shame. Sitting there in the dropship, his mind a swirl of shocked recollections and impressions of the conflict, Ju had spelled it out to him miserably, her grief forcing uncharacteristic emotion into her broken voice. Just one among too many who never made it to the extraction point.

Kais stopped and breathed, concerned at the anger of his thoughts. The display wafer felt heavy in his pocket, and he fingered its rounded edges distractedly, repeating its calming litany to himself.

His father had given a speech once, recorded by porhui journalists on the eve of his death at the hands of the yhe hivefleet, so the story went, ripped apart by some shrieking monster. The speech was broadcast on all porhui channels to mark his loss an inspirational gush of propaganda and affirmation. Kais had seen it so often it was inscribed upon his memory, as indelible as a didactic imprint:

Remember the machine, OShiur had said, staring at the camera drone directly, acidic gaze boring into the viewers brain. It has interlocking parts, each operating with perfect efficiency, each as vital as every other. This machine works only because each component works. It succeeds only because each part of it is operating in order.

Sometimes a segment may seem redundant Sometimes the wheels appear more vital than the fuel reserve or or the grinding cogs seem more necessary

than the pistons. Its an illusion. One wont work without another.

Were all part of the machine. We live for it, we work for it, we fight for it. And, when the time comes, we die for it. The old warrior had blinked his eyes then, and looked away from the camera. When he looked back, he seemed distant, sad somehow. Kais had always wondered about that.

But in a way, he went on, we never die. Because it doesnt matter if a piece of the machine doesnt operate any more. As long as the whole continues to function, the memories and achievements of each part remain with it forever.

Prowling through the darkness, his dead fathers words haunting his mind, Kais wondered if Yhol had died for the machine. When he drew his last breath, had he done so with a thought for the tauva, lifting his spirit and sealing his contribution to the Greater Good forever? Or was he simply blown into moist fragments for the sake of a few moments of distraction?

Kais felt, somehow, that he owed it to Yhol to ensure that the attack on the prison was a success, and to that end hed volunteered for the principal role in the elaborate plan. The assault a storm raging just beyond the caves was just another deceit. Just another distraction to allow someone him to creep into the compound. This time it was his responsibility, only his, to ensure that every last fire warrior fighting and dying on the surface remained a part of his fathers magnificent, idealistic machine.

He wondered vaguely why ElLusha had acquiesced to his request. To dispatch a shasla on such an important mission was, he knew, an extraordinary risk. He scowled into the gloom, spotting an ascending flight of stairs leading into the fortress, and reminded himself that it didnt matter why the commander had relented. All that mattered was that he had. Kais bit back on a feral smile and racked his pulse rifle hungrily, eager for targets.

He ought to relax, he knew. He ought to calm himself. Instead he killed another cringing guela in a storm of pulsefire, and every singed, smoking wound that he inflicted was dispensed in Yhols name.

He ascended the stairs into the bowels of the fortress and the killing went on and on and on.

<Tightbeam commstream detection (0/419.h).>

<Servitor 56G/x attending (0/442.D). Telepath assistance declined.>

<Datastream reception only (0/491 .g).>

<Channel open.>

++*Enduring Blade?*++

[Received. Time reference 1632.17 (terracode), D. 5732341 .M41.]

[Carrier ident. recognised. Local link established.]

[Identify.]

++Colony 4356/E, Dolumar IV. This is Governor Meyloch Severus.++

[Hold.]
[Vocal analysis confirmation.]
[State secure-channel code.]
++I need to speak with the admiral.++
[State secure-channel code.]
++Who is this?++
[Servitor 56G/x (Rotho#2). State secure-channel code.]
++Oh, for thrones sake++
++Here. AGGE-2567-G.++
[Hold.]
[Secure-channel code verified.]
[State your business.]
++I need to speak with the admiral. Priority level alpha.++
[Requesting personnel.]
[Hold.]
[This is Ensign Kilson. The admirals busy state your business.]
++It is essential that I speak with the admiral. Interrupt him, if need be.++
[Im afraid]
++Listen to me very carefully, ensign. You will tell the admiral that Governor Severus needs to speak with him urgentl++
[But]
++Quiet. If you do not, ensign, I will ensure that my acute displeasure, along with your name, is conveyed directly to the Officio Navis Nobilitate. Is that clear?++
[]
++Let me speak to the admiral. Now.++
[Stand stand-by.]
[]
[]
[]
[Severus? What do you want?]
++Is that Admiral Constantine?++
[No. Its Vandire himself, back from the dead. Of course its me.]
++So generous of you to bother.++
[Dont waste my time, governor. I have a ship to run.]
++I need your help. My colony is under attack.++
[Emperors blood, man! Youve got four warp-damned regiments down there! Plus the special troops you requested last week.]
++Theyre not enough. Im facing an invasion.++
[Inva? By who?]

++The tau. Theyve breached the treaty.++

[Terras Throne]

++Indeed.++

++Admiral, I hardly need acquaint you with the seriousness of this situation. If my factories aren't operating, this subsector can consider itself unarmed.++

++There's an enemy vessel in orbit. I'd appreciate your assistance.++

[Were on our way.]

++We?++

[You're in luck, Severus.]

[The *Enduring Blade* just rendezvoused with the Fleet Ultima Primus. Were a two-hour warp jump from the edge of your system.]

[The tau won't know what hit them.]

Kais waited until the flow of fluids from the pulverised corpse resolved into a sluggish ebb of arterial paste, then rifled through the creature's pockets. The gaudier these guela dressed, he reasoned, the more important they seemed to be.

He found a wafer of brittle plastic, identified by the sensors in his helmet as having a shaped magnetic field, in a utility holster on one of the body's lower limbs. A keycard, the helmet's computer speculated. Kais found himself wondering abstractly about the appearance of the humans' hooves, hidden away like infant-flesh inside its bulky boots. The mad desire to rip them off to find out made him nod in amusement, despite himself.

The dead body crackled, startling him. It took him a moment to ascertain that the tinny voice derived from the comms-bead fixed to the cadaver's stained lapel, its distorted reportage so unlike the clear tones of his own communicator.

C-captain Praeter? a guela voice said, stammering with (Kais assumed) nerves. Sir? This is Warden Tiernen. I'm on the artillery ring. The men up here are dead. I think they've been shot, sir. Somethings got inside. Somethings in here with us.

Kais scowled as his didactic memories translated the crackling voice, irritated that his presence should be discovered already. His search for an access point to the underground holding cells was not going well.

The guela fortress was a maze of shadows and angles, asymmetrical clusters of architecture distorting the expectations and unhinging the senses. It was a black brainstorm of metal struts, intestinal ducts, valve-like bulkheads scored by dribbling rivulets of oil and water and stained glass eyes, glaring down on every hallway in a kaleidoscope of insane colour and surreal iconography. To walk through it unguided was to be lost in an incoherent

labyrinth, dissolving in the guts of some awful creature with blinking LEDs for nerve endings and cabling for its sinews. Only by carefully watching the positioning scanners of his HUD could he maintain any sense of direction, and focus his efforts around the sealed access yard at the compounds heart.

Sneaking along a corridor, he shivered at the buttresses and load supports that branched from the walls like gnarled roots, chain-infested chandeliers of wrought iron and sputtering light drooping from the recesses above; like scraps of flesh clinging to a colossal ribcage that threaded with fossilised immobility throughout the prisons structure.

A dull detonation somewhere outside ripped apart a stained-glass circle further along the hallway, sending a vivid hailstorm of colour chattering and tinkling across the floor. The jumbled noises of the battle outside seemed alien in this crypt-like space; an aural reminder of another world. Kais picked his way through the shadows and climbed a winding staircase, hugging the walls. The thick door at the summit lacked any obvious opening device, even one of the guelas crude lever appendages hed spotted elsewhere. His helmet sensors chimed, flickering graphics isolating a narrow groove in the doorways frame and matching it effortlessly with the keycard hed taken from the officers body. He pushed the brittle shape into its slot and surged forwards, even as the door squealed open.

The two warden-guards lurking in the gloomy chamber beyond were too astonished to react effectively, bent over an array of switches, winking lights and clicking gauges. Unable to prevent himself, Kais grinned.

The first one fell backwards, legs flipping athletically as his pulverised chest arced away, smoke lifting from the wound. His head hit the console on the way down, an ugly *krak* that flipped the body over. It landed on its knees, forehead pressed to the floor.

No! the second one shouted, reacting mechanically, staggering backwards and groping for a weapon. Kais barely shifted position, carrying his body around in a perfect arc, as effortless as it was natural. Hed been born for this.

He squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. The untaulike desire to shout or curse in frustration bubbled up inside him, and he bit down on it hard.

The las-shot hit him like a sledgehammer.

Hed expected a sharp, ripping pain. Hed expected it to feel like a needle, sliding through his flesh, separating sinews from bones, opening muscles like ripe fruit.

Instead it was an anvil crashing into his shoulder, spinning him around on his spot and sending angry, nebulous blobs of colour dancing before his eyes. He crashed to the floor, feet trailing before him.

It was only when the initial shock had faded, when he blinked through the film of eurii moisture covering his eyes, that the sense of sharpened agony

began to blossom. An ugly laceration marred his upper arm, a blistering mess of cauterised flesh and singed fiodr fabric. The pain clouded the world and stole his ability to think.

To Kais it seemed as natural as taking a breath: his mind phased out the world and replaced it with a grey dreamscape. There were words.

They said:

No expansion without equilibrium.

No conquest without control.

Pursue success in serenity

And service to the tauva.

He breathed. He saw himself as part of the machine. Focus was the key.

The pain went away.

He jerked the knife from its holster on his hip, twisting to look up at the guela, its shaking hands taking aim for a second shot. He threw the knife and rolled. All one movement. Perfect. Precise.

The lasgun fired just as the knife hit the guard in the neck, a surgical incision parting flesh like water. No blood. Not yet. The las-bolt kicked a block of stone from the floor, scant torils from Kaiss head. He hissed in shock.

The human stared right at Kais. Right into the optic of his helmet, knife hilt protruding absurdly, perpendicular to his horrified features. Then he dropped the gun and his head flopped forwards like an opening lid, fountaining liquid ruby.

Reality came to Kais piece by piece. He retrieved his knife and clamped a medipack onto his blistered arm. He reloaded the gun. All without thought; mechanical, going through the paces, operating to the parameters of a simple, shell-shocked program. A machine.

Through the thick windows of the control room he could peer down into the exercise yard at the compounds centre, four heavysset access ramps preventing him or anyone from reaching the subterranean cells. He transferred his attention to the myriad controls spread out before him, utterly unable to decipher even a single runic inscription.

He sighed, balled his fist tightly, raised his arm, and applied the only form of engineering he understood. After several raikors of destructive attention, he appeared to have hit the correct control. Out in the yard, lifting like the yawning mouths of slumbering giants, the access ramps began to open.

Hes gaining entry as we speak, Shaso, the transmitter reported, tiny speaker drone following the general around like a faithful uit cub. He paused at a schematic of the prisons upper levels and nodded.

Shaso Sacea Udas was pleased. Everything was going according to plan,

thus far. The serene, rounded interior of the warship *Ores Tashvar* enclosed him in a womb of pleasant silence and contemplation: the perfect platform from which to conduct a war.

Good, he replied, the small drone rolling onto its back to expose a microphone array. Excellent. Is he unharmed?

A minor wound, Shaso. Nothing serious.

Indeed. Tell me, ElLusha what's the name of this shasvre? The porhui have been requesting details for their next bulletin.

There was a pause on the comm. Udas glanced at the drone, perplexed. When finally the red receiving light blinked, Lusha's voice sounded reluctant, even embarrassed. He's not a shasvre, O Udas.

The general blinked. The schematic on the wall refreshed itself, an AI assembled mélange of radar, lasergrid and high altitude survey-drone telemetry melded together, now showing the access ramps in the prison courtyard hanging open.

ElLusha he said, keeping his voice carefully neutral. Who did you send?

I assure you, Shaso, my choice is more than capable.

Who?

Shasla Tau Kais.

A *shasla*?

Yes, Shaso. I made a decision based upon the requirements of the mission. I believe he's the best for the job.

Udas forced himself to calm, mumbling the Dhavre meditation. There was no sense in anger.

ElLusha Perhaps you might explain to me what possessed you to send a shasla on a mission vital to the security of the Empire.

The words seemed to come from far away.

It was something OShiur said to me once, Shaso. He told me that sometimes even broken components can be useful to the machine.

Broken components? Shasel, explain yours.

Forgive me, Shaso. I have to go. The fortress guns are being remanned. There was a loud boom in the background. We could use that strike when you're ready, Shaso. Lusha out.

The comm went dead. Udas pursed his lips, fighting his irritation.

Dismissed, he grumbled to the drone, still circling his head. It drifted off.

He composed himself and turned around. Koro Natasha Tyra, captain of the *Ores Tashvar*, stood resplendent in his pale flightrobes at the centre of a swarm of drones, each one inscribed with a simple control icon. Every now and again, in response to a comm signal or fluttering display readout on the two sleek console drones at the head of the suspended swarm, O Tyra would depress the touchpad on a drone's casing transmitting whatever relevant orders

might be required to some distant part of the ships crew. Other air caste personnel lined the outer walls of the command deck, operating sensors and secondary systems with as much fluidity and grace as their superior. The koros mastery of his vessel was an astonishing aerial ballet, and Udas had in the past decs regarded it with fascination. Now he had more pressing business.

Koro? he grunted, approaching.

Shaso, the captain returned with a nod, tall frame towering over Udass squat form.

Commence bombardment.

Warden-Sergeant DiGril peered through the sniper slit on the prisons upper level and shook his head. Something was wrong.

Beyond the walls the massed alien forces, lurking and weaving through the billowing sand, domed helmets hazing in and out of the airborne filth like deep-sea predators prowling the murk, were slowly but unmistakably creeping backwards. Not retreating, exactly; rather backing off. Giving some space.

Emperor knew the prison needed it. Finally the reinforcement shuttles had started arriving from Lettica, picking their way through the churning smoke, harried by the xeno assault craft. Two had gone down, right in front of his eyes, the poor bastards inside strapped down and helpless in their seats as some warp-damned alien knocked a hole through their boats engine. Fire and death and the stink of burnt meat. Not the way he wanted to go.

Not that he particularly wanted to go any way, given the chance. Certainly not shot through the head like Warden-Captain Praeter, downstairs. Someone had found his body and announced it on the comm, right before all the cell-breach alarms started going off. It was one thing after another just when the freaks outside stopped to take a break, it turned out there was one inside, creeping about like a orkspoor ghost.

DiGril hadnt joined the swollen ranks of the Emperors Adeptus Detentio just to die at the hands of some godless xenogen, a resolution that he had firmly continued to support by secreting himself in the most remote section of the prison he could find. Discretion, he had always maintained, was the better part of valour.

If truth be told, Warden-Sergeant DiGril had (until this morning) thoroughly enjoyed his posting to this backwater world. The planetary governors renowned intolerance to criminality meant that those citizens foolish enough to break the law were more likely to find themselves executed than incarcerated; a state of affairs that had kept the vast compound all but deserted in recent years. DiGril had, on occasion, mentally questioned the

sense in constructing such a formidable penal fortress if one never intended to use it, but having quickly settled into his undemanding role he knew better than to cause a fuss.

Not that the strangeness had terminated there, oh no. Last week, out of the blue, the governor had ordered Captain Praeter to execute what few prisoners they held, clear all the cells for new arrivals, and stockpile ammunition for the artillery defences. Stranger still, a series of datum drones dead skulls filled with memorised information had arrived in the captains office courtesy of the governor. Each one was a mine of subversive articles on xenogen species: images, essays, interrogation documents, biological treatises, voice record seminars on weaknesses and strengths, a million-and-one ugly facts about ugly beings that the captain had ordered him to recite to the other guards over and over again. It was as if Governor Severus was expecting xeno-trouble.

Well, hed got his wish.

Quivering in the deserted shadows of the sniper ring, whimpering at every rumbling bombardment from without, Sergeant DiGril was praying that it wouldnt occur to any of his men that, with the captain dead, he was supposedly in charge now.

The aliens in the courtyard, someone barked on the comm. Im sealing the cell access ramps now. There were men back in the control room, then. Good. DiGril nodded professionally, happy to have incidentally delegated responsibility. Finally, something was going right.

With depressing inevitability, the voice on the comm swore. Oh, throne The north ramps jammed. It wont do Ah, damn. Its gone! General alert! The intruders breached the underground levels.

DiGril rubbed his forehead. *Typical.*

His conscience gave him a jab. Rather than sitting here complaining, it said, how about getting out there and issuing some orders? Taking command, maybe? Doing some good?

No chance, he grumbled to himself. Not for all the many wives of the governor-sultan of Gammenon IX. Certainly not just for the chance to be a hero. Leave that sort of thing to the youngsters. Something caught his attention, gnawing on his senses. It took him a moment to identify what it was.

It was silence. Absolute, perfect calm. The sonic barrage of vehicles and pulsefire beyond the prison walls had sputtered and died. He pressed his face to the sniper slit and peered through the shifting smoke-clouds, confused.

The tau stood in quiet ranks, like ancient statues erected in the desert, ossified and unreal. Every last one of them was looking upwards.

Korvesa 66.G#77 (Orbsat Surveillance) adjusted its primary optic focus on

the planetary horizon and opened a datastream. Its parent node aboard the *Ores Tashvar* responded with a withering hail of security checks and analysis scans lasting a fraction of a heartbeat. An oscillating band of microwaves tightbeamed between the two processors, narrowing its focus appropriately. A secure frequency was isolated, verified and maintained. 66.G clucked an emotionless greeting. The *Ores Tashvar* responded in kind.

Dolumar IV, a Kreui-class world with tolerable atmosphere and meteorological conditions, defined within 66.Gs memorysphere as *guela iora*, rolled beneath the surveillance drones field of vision enormously. The dark strip of shadow marking the planets terminator, where day oozed gradually into night, seeped across continents like a great, hungry parasite.

A cluster of signals arrived from the *Ores Tashvar*. The drone responded immediately by adjusting its secondary optics, focusing them upon the distant speck of light representing its parent vessel. A bright blue glow was building beneath the warships forward segment.

66.G adjusted its horizontal position in relation to the planet. Damage analysis would require careful scrutiny. The warship broadcast a final set of emergency codes on all frequencies and fired.

66.G tracked the glittering droplet of energy as it fell away towards the planet, briefly developing a milky corona as it punctured the upper cloud level. By the time it reached the surface it was little more than a blue speck, leaving a ghostly ion trail behind it.

The little drone implemented its most powerful magnification filter and recorded the impact.

Many *guela* died.

Kais felt the impact underground.

Hed dropped past the massive access ramp mere moments before it sealed behind him, its rockcrete surface grinding into place with tectonic enormity. Standing beside it now he felt the earth tremble angrily, sending splinter marks writhing across walls and avalanches of dry earth and rust-weakened bolts rattling from the ceiling. The control panel beside the ramp hissed a fountain of sparks in protest, tiny viewscreens shattering.

ElLusha? he transmitted, when finally the floor stopped shifting. What was that?

The reply, masked and indecipherable behind an ambient hiss of white noise, aborted with an unpleasant rasp. Kais frowned and regarded his surroundings, fingering his gun nervously. The corridor, poorly lit by bulkhead-mounted illuminators, stretched away towards a sharp corner like the gullet of a *krootox*, slick with condensed moisture.

The wound on his arm throbbed, a dull ache from beneath the medipack

hed clipped over it. He hoped hed been quick enough in administering the covering guela were notorious carriers of disease. Not for the first time, Kais curled his lip in distaste at the thought of being so deeply immersed in their unclean world. Every fibre in his body cried out for the serene cleanliness of Tau with its ancient, basking mountains and its functional cities of silver and ivory.

The first guards came in a rush: a confused glut of guttural shouting voices and dark uniforms, attracted by the alarms that had accompanied the ramps closure. Kais made himself comfortable to receive them, wedging himself into an alcove near the tunnels apex and clenching his hooves together. He scooped his body into a low crouch and raised the rifle, its crosshair artificially superimposed over his HUD.

They went down in a storm of grasping limbs, blocking the tunnel and tripping those behind them, orbs of pulsefire briefly illuminating the vaultway, hurling damp slabs of meat and bone across the walls and floor. Some of them, apparently able to operate beyond the remit of panic and adrenaline, sidestepped into a small antechamber, exchanging covering fire in a barrage of echoing insults and goads. A delaying tactic, Kais knew. They were waiting for backup.

He rolled a grenade into the shadows of the alcove, and when it exploded he sprinted forwards, not waiting for the smoke to clear, following the dismal moans of the injured. He silenced them quickly a single shot through the head for each.

The last one, ragged scorch wounds dappling its legs and chest, pleaded with him, tear- and snot-clogged words an unintelligible drone of fear and helplessness. Its blistered fingers scrabbled against Kaiss legs, clutching and supplicating, sobbing pathetically. Kais recoiled from the contact, finger tightening against the trigger.

Unbidden, a memory sagged, sludgelike, into his mind:

*The alien is not intrinsically evil.
Do not hate him. Pity him his ignorance.
Seek to understand his differences
And acquaint him with his inadequacies.
Only then will he accept his place
in the Greater Good.*

It was a Siot meditation committed to memory long taucyrs ago supposedly composed by the great hero OMautel. Since its inscription, of course, the tau had encountered both the insane, green-skinned Begel and the ever-devouring The: two races, each in their own way utterly incapable of integration with the tauva. The meditation had been quietly dropped from later editions of the Siot, but Kais had always remembered it. Perhaps in some

dark, rogue part of his mind, the idea that his peoples social principles were not always correct had given him comfort.

What do you want? he said, staring down at the creature. Why are y What are you doing here? Why are you fighting us? Lame questions. Halfhearted questions. He was no water caste porla, after all. But the need to try the need to do something the right way was too strong to ignore.

The language itself felt just as bizarre now, grating against his throat, as it had done when the fioui medics grafted it into his mind at the third didactic treatment. He remembered spending decs afterwards with Ju and Yhol, trying out the strange alien words appearing as if from nowhere inside their memories.

The sobbing human didnt seem to hear his questions. It just clutched at his leg gibbering. Please throne no dont sweet emperor no dont kill me oh living god not now, p-please dont Im begging you

Quiet. Human. Be quiet.

It would not be silent.

Please oh I dont want to, no, I oh, I dont want to die oh Terra please

It would not be silent and, worse, it was bleeding all over his legs. Sticky warm guela blood, dribbling and filthy against his hooves.

Throne no please Emperor no no

He pumped a shot into its head and blotted out the horror and revulsion before it even hit him. He was getting good at that.

Something was clanging nearby, a rhythmic knocking that sent him dropping into an alert crouch, wary of every shadow, senses racing on overdrive. His slow scan of the room ended on a thick metal door, whorls of rust and moisture patterning it obscenely. A crude magnetic lock to one side winked its red eye conspiratorially at him. He lifted the rifle and obliterated the small device, quickly turning the gun on the door to face whatever horrors were revealed.

The metal disc rolled aside with a throaty roar. A dead man stepped out.

Kais? said Yhol.

* * * * *

The apparition outside his cell could hardly be less friendly in appearance. Its polished shoulderguards and taupe armour were dulled by dust and filth, splattered with a drying galaxy of blood. Its fiodr regs were stained and torn, an ugly singe mark marring its upper arm. Its weapon a tangle of human blood and flesh decorating its tip tilted up to glare at him.

But the unit code on its breast was clear, even beneath the filth. Shasla Tau Kais. Yhol stared at his best friend in astonishment, mind refusing to

work.

They greeted each other in a tangle of relief, all horrors forgotten, clasping arms and pressing twice on the circle of armour over their hearts, a greeting reserved for familiars and friends. Kais kept repeating, over and over:

We thought you were dead We thought you were dead

Yhol nodded, amused. Kais had always been too ready to expect the worst. Of course not, he smiled grimly. Just a scratch. He grunted and lifted his leg, a singed chunk of flesh missing just below the knee. Kais hissed, scrabbling in his utilities for a spare medipack.

Relax, Yhol winced, easing the limb back to the floor. Its sealed over. A snaeta guela cauterised it in the shuttle on the way here. Said prisoners arent allowed to die until theyve answered some questions.

There are more survivors?

Yes Yhol blinked, the insanity of the situation finally catching up with him. Kais, whats going on? Where is this place a-and why are you even here? The morass of jumbled questions subsided as a single, overbearing enquiry bubbled in his mind. Whats *happening*, by the path?

Theyve captured an Aim, Kais said, leading him out into the corridor. Yhol didnt recognise the voice full of a sharp resonance hed never heard before. It sounded focused, an attribute hed never have associated with Kais until now.

An Aun? he breathed, horrified.

Thats right, his friend nodded, gelatinous gore clotting across his limbs. Im here to find him.

Whats happened to you? Yhol whispered, suddenly afraid. Kais just stared at him, expressions hidden behind the glaring optic of his helmet.

I found my niche, he replied.

Together they worked their way back to the sealed access ramp, Vhol leaning on Kais with every painful, limped step.

Can you open it? Kais said, all business, nodding at the smoking panel beside the ramp.

Yhol frowned. B-but The Aun

Thats my path, Yhol.

Your path?

Can you open it?

Yhol sighed, turning to the controls. This was all too much, too bewildering. Dealing with mundanity seemed the only way to cope. He squinted at the blasted circuitry, sparing a disparaging shake of his head for the crude guela technology, despite his bewilderment. Yes, he grunted, Yes, I can open it. Itll take me a whi

Fine. Ill send the rest of the prisoners here. You should be safe when you

reach the surface. I think ElLusha has everything under control.

But Kais The grime-covered warrior, shadows lurking in the scored depression of the helmets central optic, turned to look at him. Yhol suddenly couldnt think of anything to say.

Good luck, he grunted, lamely.

Kais nodded once and ghosted away into the shadows. Yhol wondered whether hed ever see his friend again. Part of him wondered whether Kais the Kais he knew existed any more anyway.

Captain Ardias, veteran of the sacred Astartes Ultramarines Chapter, leader of the 3rd Company and Commander of the Arsenal, rarely enjoyed the opportunity to sleep.

In accordance with the stringent non-campaign daily agenda documented within the Codex Astartes, every Marine was accorded four hours of natural meditation-induced sleep every day. It was dreamless, supposedly, a time for bodily relaxation and total mental rest. Ardias hated it. It was four hours wasted; four hours that might be spent on the firing range, or in a training hangar, or conducting any one of the multifarious and complex ceremonies of worship that the monastic life of a Space Marine entailed.

Seated enormously on the cold floor, eyes fixed on the miniature shrine devoted jointly to the Emperor and to the Ultramarines Primarch, Roboute Guilliman, Ardias fidgeted distractedly and tried to get comfortable. Divested of his armour and its servomusculature he felt slow and ponderous, subject to niggling distractions like the coarseness of his robes and the drafts of his cell. He sighed and closed his eyes, trying to focus his mind.

It wasnt even that sleep was necessary, especially. Deep in his skull the artificial cataleptean node could, when required, divert the ceaseless flow of his mental activity, allowing each cerebral lobe to rest whilst the other remained alert. In such a state a Marine could operate indefinitely, relentlessly serving the Emperor in a fashion unthinkable to normal, inferior humans. Only because it was so decreed in the Codex (and, he admitted, because of the vague danger of cranial trauma and psychosis), did Ardias accept his four wasted hours with good grace. He didnt have to like it.

But today today sleep wouldnt come.

Perhaps, he considered, it was the unfamiliarity of his surroundings. For a man raised beneath the martial disciplines of Ultramar, thereafter growing accustomed to the simple but inspiring magnificence of the Fortress of Hera upon Macragge, this small naval cabin with its duct artery walls and rusted bulkhead hatches was an untidy, disordered distraction. The vessels distant generariums elicited a constant hum, refusing to seep away into the subconscious in a stave of tiny variations, forever reminding his ears of their

presence.

But that was an excuse, he knew. Hed slept under far worse conditions in the past. Hed entered the fugue state on Galathas II whilst the population of the ice city trembled, waiting for the eldar to come Hed slept in the shuddering hold of a strikehawk following the campaign to push back the orks on the moons of Feals World Hed calmly slipped into meditation without concern or fear in the catacombs of Yielth, waiting for the tech-priests to fix the access elevator before the rainwater drowned his entire squad. He could sleep through a meteor strike, if the need took him.

No. The cabin wasnt the problem. It was what lay beyond. Beyond the corridor striated innards of this ugly battlecruiser, its clamour-filled hollows so unlike the quiet solemnity of an Astartes battle barge; beyond its dark spaces and cable-infested walls, beyond its thick adamantium hull and the thrumming lenticular void shields.

Coiling and billowing, ethereal tentacles caressing the vessel as it churned by, the raw belly of the warp surrounded him on all sides. The empyrean, they called it. Crackling and seething, haunted by shifting, unreal things It was the beneath. It was the over there. It was a gap into which entire vessels could be plunged, steered only by the arcane gifts of the frail psychic navigator entombed within the ships systems, guided by the radiance of the Astronomican the Emperors dying legacy to the Imperium.

It was Chaos, raw and unfettered, and it made Ardias shiver. To be so close to such malevolence and yet to be completely at its mercy, helpless and insubstantial; it was a feeling distinctly alien to a Space Marine.

So no, today the sleep wouldnt come. Today his meditations ebbed and shifted, drifting from subject to subject, refusing to allow his muscles to unwind, his tension to ooze away.

But there was more than that. Anxiety alone had never bothered him before, nor did it now. Today there was something else catching on his mind, turning his thoughts away from slumber.

Librarian Delpheus had received a vision. A vision of battle, so he said. A vision of chattering bolters, screaming enemies the signature disordered order of combat. Hed reported it to Ardias scant hours earlier, moments before the riotous vessel under way alarms sounded and the warship slipped with a cold lurch into the warp. The librarian had been vague, clearly shaken by whatever mystical process hed undergone. Ardias appreciated Delpheuss work but could never bring himself to envy his old comrade. The psychic mutation was a poisoned chalice, more curse than gift. Still, whatever the details of the vision, the core of Delpheuss prediction remained the same: action.

After a while, Ardias gave up trying to meditate and prowled his cabin restlessly, uncertain why he should be so eager for combat, but anxious for its

arrival nonetheless. The *Enduring Blade* slid across the warp, ploughing a long furrow through the unseen somethings that gibbered all around it, gathering like mosquitoes around a faint light, raking their mist-like claws across its void shields in ceaseless hunger for the souls within.

There'd been ten other prisoners, in the end.

They'd staggered off into the compound, holding each other up, not sure whether to thank or flee their saviour. Kais had seen the look in their eyes; the way they stared him up and down. One of them delirious from the pain of his wounds had even said it. The one, ugly little word they were all thinking as their cell doors rumbled open and he stood there, gifting them with their freedom.

Montau the warrior had hissed, feverish eyes staring in fear and uncertainty. The others had shushed him nervously, unwilling to tolerate such blatant sentiment, and limped away into the gloom towards Yhol and freedom.

Montau. The Terror.

It was a word from the time before the Auns came and preached the tauva. Before the tribes became castes, before the wars ended and the blood stopped rushing and order came to Tau.

Montau was a state-of-being without progress, without unity or altruism, without direction or purpose or strength. There was a purity, he supposed, in its selfishness: a focus upon the I before the we. And they'd seen it in him.

As he descended the stairs, his HUD automatically adjusting to accommodate the waning light, Kais caught sight of his reflection in a polished illuminator fitting. Suddenly he could understand the captives' anxieties.

He appeared, in that tiny fish-eyed representation, to be a lurching thing of soot and dust, dappled white and black in equal measure, crusted over by a drying layer of blood. He was a daemon in Fire Warrior armour. He was a ghost of the past, a Montau devil, bathing in the blood of his enemies and existing only to kill.

Only he wasn't; he just looked the part. He took a breath and forced himself to believe it.

A doorway hung open, perpendicular to the stairway. He stepped through, scanning for movement. Above him the ceiling lifted away in a dizzying sweep of swan-neck buttresses of polished obsidian, catching and scattering the light from a phalanx of tall candles. Chiselled flagstones rose towards a marbled altar, itself crested by an enormous icon figure of carved alabaster.

The complex shape caught at his eye and he found himself staring in fascination, trying to decipher the stylised effigy. It seemed to comprise a

withered shape, desiccated and frail. He realised with a frown that it was a guela figure, almost corpselike in its aspect. Its great papery head ringed by serried light rays and lightning bolts, hung in limp necrosis, sallow features wrinkled and bloodless. Around and within the skeletal shape was a stylised machine encrusted with yellow and gold mosaic tiles, a rambling arrangement of clustered cables and bound tubing, puncturing and entombing the body, surrounding it in a metallic embrace.

The cadavers eyes peered down into the candlelit chapel with a great, hollow sadness, filling the chamber with mournful tension.

Was this their god? he wondered. Was this their Great Emperor, stubbornly hoarding the faith of his teeming flock and preventing their rightful acquiescence to the Greater Good? A rotting, pestilent corpse ruling over his rotting, pestilent empire. Kais fought to contain his revulsion, regarding the statue blankly. They deserved each other.

He raised his rifle and sighted on the pale figure, its very existence a bitter slur upon the efficiency and purity of the tauva. To even waste an energy bead upon it was damning in its display of his intemperance, but he felt somehow that in obliterating the icon he would be achieving something palpable.

But he couldnt do it.

The crosshair wandered across the smooth carved lines, full of destructive promise, but every time his finger tightened over the rifles trigger, every time he imagined the fragmented pieces of alabaster spinning nebulously away, every time he moved his gaze anywhere near the pitiful shape, those ancient, aching eyes pinned him to his spot.

Somehow, without even bearing a trace of similarity, the abrasive stare of the withered god reminded him of his father, seeing into and through him, exposing his ugliest thoughts. He couldnt destroy it. He couldnt even look away from it.

It was almost a relief when a guela soldier, hiding nearby, shattered the silence of the chapel in a hail of lasgun bolts and the stink of ionised air.

Kais rolled to the floor instinctively, scrabbling for the cover of a nearby pillar. A second opportunistic salvo from the lurking sniper snapped at his heels, kicking rocky craters in his impromptu shield. An idea formed.

Kais cried out, a scream of pain and fear that no true shasla would ever articulate, and when the echoes from the sniperfire had died he moaned again, the anguished sob of a crippled, dying warrior.

The guela broke cover, chuckling in premature celebration, slouching over to inspect his trophy. The pulsedshot pulverised his chest before he knew what was happening, blasting him backwards onto the flagstones with a strangled yelp. Kais silently picked his way back towards the corridor, keeping his back to the statue.

The hallway descended in a snaking series of chambers, each a little darker and more organically cluttered by the rambling, reticulated paraphernalia of guela technology than the last. As Kais entered the lowest level of the prison compound his thoughts were a tangle of violence, ancient devils and dark eyes glaring into his soul.

Genetor Farrachus wiped his sweating fingers on his robes and adjusted the valve wheel. A gurgle of steam belched past him, condensing on the cold components of his face.

High overhead the first ratchet joints of the chain clicked open and the device, wobbling and spinning, began to descend. Like a crown designed for a giants head, laced with intricate black circuitry and ornamented with all the arcane technology of the Adeptus Mechanicus, it creaked its way downwards: an ebony chandelier hung with wormlike wiring and festooned with flickering readouts. An angular strip of runes illuminated with a whine.

Seated at the exact centre of the chamber, thin arms and legs pinioned by steel brackets, the alien captive regarded the suspended diadem from directly below, features betraying none of its thoughts. Farrachus watched it closely, hoping for some small flicker of fear. None was forthcoming.

Its ready, my lord, he mumbled, doing his best to conceal the nervousness in his voice. Beyond a thick lead glass partition across the chamber the governor waited, arms crossed impatiently. He leaned forwards and flicked at an intercom.

Then get on with it.

Farrachus nodded, looking back at the xenogen. Thus far its placidity had belied the accepted dogma, portraying aliens as vicious and aggressive, abominations that threatened humanitys very survival. Still, he told himself, adjusting the plasma pistol in his belt, best not to take any chances.

The ethereal returned his gaze calmly. Where the restraints dug into its skin the creatures grey colouration grew pale and wan, starved of blood. Farrachus fought the desire to touch it, to drag a fingertip across the dry texture of its flesh, just to experience the feel of it.

But, of course, the governor was watching. Farrachus shivered, uneasy at being on display.

You smell of fear, the xeno trilled. He ignored it, secretly appalled at the obviousness of his anxiety.

The *machina excrucia*, so named by whatever ancient tech-priest had first called forth a machine spirit into its circular frame, had undergone his refinements with good grace. The physiology of the tau a subject close to his heart was somewhat different to that of the common human. Hed augmented the devices conductors, subtly altering the positioning of its various synapse

arrays, even narrowing the central locking spine. A taus skull, he had discovered during his studies, was rather more brittle than that of a human. Today, nothing must go wrong.

He saw with some satisfaction that the ethereal had ceased its empty glare in his direction, turning its dark eyes upwards again towards the device. The machine cast its globular shadow across the aliens face, a toothless mouth positioning itself to swallow him whole.

What will it do? the alien asked, voice flat.

It passes an energy stream across your pain centres, he replied, guiding the hanging coronet as it descended. At least, its supposed to. Our understanding of your biology is rather limited, mores the pity, but Im confident my alterations will yield fruit. Ideally, the *excrucia* simulates the sensation of physical pain without causing any real damage. Im told that the more tenacious subjects whove felt its bite have lingered for hours, with no respite and no medical attention. Theres no escape, Aun. Not even in death. Farrachus smiled, stealing a sideways glance at Severus. He looked bored.

A skull-servitor corkscrewed its way through the chambers airspace, skeletal face sealed at the mouth and nostrils. Its eyelids hung open, lifeless, long-dead eyeballs replaced by polished silver beads. It looked like an insect, hovering on a trail of incense and disrupted air, compound eyes reflecting the world in an ugly convex distortion. Farrachus nodded at it.

Commence recording, he grunted. A red light high on the disembodied heads brow blinked on. Farrachus glanced at the timecode artificially imposed over his vision. Interrogation proceeding at 08.14 hrs, local time. Magos Farrachus attendi

The intercom clicked. Priest? What are you doing?

Farrachus scratched his eyebrow, uncertain. Recording the interrogation, my lord. It is standard practice.

Dont.

But, my lord Dont you want the, ah, the subjects responses recorded?

Which responses?

To your questions, my lord. I-I assumed you wanted some information

There are no questions, priest. Just hurt it. Make it *pliable*.

Farrachus mouthed wordlessly for a moment, searching for something to say. Pliable for what, he wondered? Severuss shadowed glare burnt through him.

Yes, my lord he blurted. He deactivated the recorder with a command and waved it away, sooty trails of scent smoke ebbing in its path. The excrucia halted its descent with a resounding click, settling lightly upon the upper dome of the aliens skull like some barbaric headdress. Farrachus took a deep breath, resonance sensors on his face crackling in mechanical peristalsis, and

stepped forwards.

Deus Mechanicus he intoned, moving his hands in the prescribed gesture of awakening. The runes on the device glowed. *Anima mechanica, exsuscitare* He flicked a control on the small console at the chairs head and a sequence of clamps on the crowns inner perimeter extended, copper conductors chattering in a volley of tiny sparks. With a final hiss the locking spine whirred to life, screwing forwards hungrily in a blur of rotating cogs and thrumming servos, needlepoint inching towards the aliens skull.

The xenos eyes were dosed, thin lips moving in some breathless alien litany, the words a strained melody of focus and defiance. Farrachus smiled to himself, knowing that meditation alone wouldnt be sufficient.

I told you he hissed into the aliens ear, interrupting its mantra. Theres no escape.

Behind him, the access portal blipped quietly.

I said no interruptions! Severus snarled, his voice lent an artificial menace by the intercom. Farrachus turned his head from the prisoner with interest, wondering which dim-witted guard was about to suffer the governors legendary temper. The door ground open noisily.

A figure pounced through before the magos could even think, a squat form of articulating armour plates surmounted by a crested helmet. It scanned the room in a blur, raising the long rifle at its side.

Farrachus thoughts moved sluggishly. The intruder was through the door and into the shadows of the rooms perimeter before hed even fully identified it. Tau, the logic-engines subsumed into his biological mind told him. Tau warrior. Enemy.

He drew his pistol, movement sensors twitching with insect accuracy, hunting for the taus bodytrace. The human part of his mind, unashamedly terrified, struggled against the implacable coldness of his technological augmentations. Stimulants flooded his brain, making his senses race and his blood roar. They didnt do any good.

A flicker of blue light at his side startled him and the tracking of his sensors, the unmistakable *crack* of bone broadcasting the locking spines grisly deployment. The *excrucia* flared to life with a horrific whine, greasy sparks coruscating around the punctured dome of the prisoners skull. Farrachus turned to watch, overcome with excitement at the culmination of his efforts. The ethereals composure shattered without trace, its thin-lipped mouth snapping open to emit a scream that dragged on and on and didnt stop. Glorifying in his work, the genetor all but forgot about the intruder.

The tau warrior stepped calmly from the shadows behind him and nestled the blocky barrel of its rifle against his skull. He felt the contact only abstractly, drug pulsing thoughts racing ahead to calculate reactions,

hypotheses and projections.

When he died, the intricate metallic ganglia suffusing his brain gyrating outwards, Genetor Farrachus was busy formulating the predicted trajectory his slumping body would take as it tumbled to the ground.

His calculations were entirely correct.

Kais had found him.

Alone and in pain, restrained at the heart of a mesh of components and cables, lit by a single overhead illuminator at the chambers apex, Aunel Tau Kovash writhed beneath the black contraption encircling his brow. He screamed unstoppably, twisted face surrounded by a shivering corona of energy, long fingers curled with rictus tension around the restraints encasing his arms. The controls at the chairs head were meaningless to Kais, an array of angular runes and unfamiliar characters, pulsing and glowing hungrily. Not knowing what else to do, feeling panic surging in his mind in empathetic horror at the ethereals screams, he turned his rifle upon the console and took aim.

Thats expensive equipment, a dry voice hissed, sending Kais into an alert stance with a start. The voice laughed, a tinny electronic cackle emanating from a speaker nearby. Kaiss roving gaze landed on the huge sheet of glass on the other side of the chamber: a window into a gloomy viewing theatre. There was a human there, sneering face dipped low to glare up past its prominent brows, aquiline features arranged in a humourless grin.

Hello, little bug it grinned.

Kaiss reaction was almost instantaneous: the rifle stuttered in his hands, long beads of pulsefire lancing towards the window. They impacted with a hollow crackle, tentacles of hazing glowlight writhing momentarily before fading to invisibility, leaving not so much as a scratch.

The human didnt even flinch. It chuckled dryly, leaning to flick a switch out of Kaiss vision.

Sergeant? it said, not taking its eyes from Kais. Meet me in the shuttle bay, please. And send one of your men to fetch the prisoner, if you would. We appear to have a problem with vermin.

A disembodied voice, thick with artificial resonance and static, replied across the intercom: As you wish.

Goodbye, little one, the human chuckled, waving flamboyantly through the glass and stabbing at another series of controls. With a lurch the viewing gallery ground its way upwards, vast elevator pistons exposed in its wake.

Kais returned his attention to the ethereal, shuddering and moaning in his seat. A long bead of blood worked its way past his rolling eyes, welling up from the wound on his forehead where a locking clamp held his skull in place.

Kais ground his teeth, considering his best course of action.

The control console detonated colourfully beneath a single rifle shot. The locking spine retracted with a slurp, trailing a grisly strand of blood and eliciting another agonised moan from Kovash. The restraint pinions snapped open grudgingly, lights flaring then fading across the machines surface as if railing against a lingering death.

Then the madness began.

A side door, masked by the shadows of the chambers perimeter, slid open with a reptilian hiss. Something entered, footsteps heavy on the grille flooring. It advanced with tectonic slowness, an impossible geometric arrangement of thrumming segments and jointed armour plates. Its stocky build belied its enormity: almost as wide as it was tall, still both dimensions dwarfed Kais utterly.

The grey-green expanses of the creatures shell broke up the sterile light in a collection of rune pitted segments, articulating with servo-fed power. Pennants and scraps of parchment, ridiculously fragile beside such magnificence, adorned its frescoed torso; a grinning skull, stylised between curving wings, set at its centre. Its arms, rolling fluidly with every step, cradled an enormous gun in jointed gauntlets, its angular stock patterned with runic inscriptions. To each side of its helmeted head, eyes blazing with amber light, wedgelike shoulder guards pistoned in time with its strides. On one an iconic depiction of a birds sharp profile, hooked beak narrowing to a vicious point, was picked out in white brushstrokes.

Kais felt bacterial before it. Insubstantial. He was an insect, throwing wide its brittle wings, preparing to be crushed underfoot. He was dust. Nothing.

For a moment, the certainty gripped him that the hulking thing must be a machine. It was too easy to imagine a lattice of engines within that brittle framework, compacted metallic viscera riddling the whole implausible structure like nerve endings, grinding fibres and drive chains ratcheting its awesome limbs.

But no: it was too precise, its steps full of the rolling fluidity of an organism. Somewhere inside that juggernaut shell, glaring out with all the arrogance and self assurance typical of their race, was a frail, pink little guela. The thought gave no comfort.

The creature tilted the barrel of its weapon, arched shoulder guard pivoting smoothly. Before the hiss of alarm could even escape Kais mouth, the muzzle had vanished behind a curtain of fire; a long droplet of superheated air flickering dizzyingly. He lurched aside clumsily, springing through a cloud of airborne debris and rotating fragments of steel, plucked from the floor and walls wherever the rapidfire barrage followed him.

He hit the ground and rolled, unable to resist crying out at the succession of angry detonations all around, tiny shards of detritus gashing at his armour and slashing at his arms and legs. Each streaking ballistic contained a small explosive charge, ripping long ribbons of impact craters into every surface.

Kais returned fire as he moved, a shambling crawl-run of ducking, lurching movements that left his aim far wide of its mark. He dived awkwardly for cover, realising with horror even as he moved that in his panic he'd fallen directly behind the torture machine, the Aun still enmeshed and inert at its heart.

With unerring precision, as if in answer to Kais's silent pleas, the storm of explosive shells was cut short moments before the ethereal became a target. His mind a tangle of fear and uncertainty, Kais realised with a start that his would-be executioner wanted to preserve the Aun just as much as he did. He wondered absurdly, at the back of his mind, what Ju and Yhol would say if he told them he'd used an ethereal as a bodyshield.

Beyond caring, he leaned out of his fragile cover and pumped shot after shot at the armoured monster lurking at the edge of the light. It didn't even bother to move.

The first pulse-orb caught it directly beneath the broad sweep of its right shoulder-guard, flaring angrily with white heat and cascading sparks. The figure jolted backwards slightly: a casual sway, as if in response to a light breeze. Each subsequent bolt repeated the ineffectual display, a fountain of dissipated energy blossoming at each impact but causing little real damage. The guela just stood there and took it all, leaning in its spot and absorbing everything that Kais threw at it.

Before he could even take stock, the guela's weapon tilted and fired, blasting the tip of his rifle into fragments. Its induction charge imploded with a flash, spinning the weapon out of his hands and propelling him bodily from his cover. Arms ringing from the impact, blinking spots from his eyes, he looked up into the glowing orbs of the guela's vision slits, watching him across the chamber. He stumbled to the floor, knees giving way.

No point, his mind told him. Not any more.

His opponent was invincible. An impregnable human fortress, impossible to besiege, futile to barrage. Who was he to stand against it?

A didactic memory, unconsciously suppressed during the action, bubbled sluggishly in his mind, identifying the armoured giant. It was a Space Marine, and the memory node contained more than enough information for him to know he was outclassed, outgunned and outdone.

Voices clamoured in his mind: gossamer wisps of text and oration, propaganda and meditation. Focus, they chimed. Unity. They filled his skull with a coiling serpent of racial assurance, a million and one certainties of the

superiority of the tauva.

They wouldnt couldnt help him anymore. Where was the great unity now? Where was the species struggle, supporting him as he supported it? Where was the great machine when he needed it? Where was the Greater Good to be found in dying here, broken and bewildered, on the floor of this filthy guela place?

His stomach knotted and with a groan, failing even in his ability to suppress his reactions, he waited to die. The marine stepped forwards, soot-blemished armour parting the clouds of weapon smoke. It was death, stalking through the cloudbanked atmosphere. Its eyes blazed.

Ave Imperator, it said, the distorted voice cold and artificial. The gun raised again. Kais couldnt even bring himself to tense his muscles.

Shasla a voice said, shakily. Sh Shas

It was a ray of light stammering on the serenity of its own words. It was a dreamscent, whispering past his senses, a pheromone medley of spice and fruit. It was a song without a chorus, a breathless celebration of melody and rhythm, stained by a taint of discordant pain.

Kais twisted his head without thinking, unable to control his mind, finding his gaze filled by Aunel Tau Kovash. The torture device had ascended into the shadows, leaving blotched burns and scratches across the ethereals pate. Weak and frail, shaking from the bone-pitted wound above his nasal orifice, the Aun raised his head defiantly and fixed Kais with a stare of pure peace. It filled his mind, overriding every sense in a rush of inexorable calmness. It waved away the smoke and the pain, it washed clean the blood in his brain and assuaged his racing thoughts. He was a puppet to it: an empty vessel given awareness of its own hollowness and somehow, against every expectation, glad of it.

If I am nothing as an individual, his mind said, then let me be content with my place in a higher order.

And he was.

In that instant, in that surreal moment of exposure to the ancient wisdom of the Aun, Shasla Tau Kais was a functioning, satisfied piece of the machine.

Never alone the ethereal said weakly.

Kais picked up the dead guelas plasma pistol. He hadnt even noticed it at his feet. He was a glove, to be filled and worn, to be manipulated and moved as the Aun saw fit. It all happened so quickly, without seeming to happen at all.

He shot the Space Marine twice. The first hazing orb of superheated plasma punched a deep crater in its torso plating, sending spiderlike fissures scuttling across the green surface. The figure toppled backwards, startled, weapon chattering spastically, spare hand clutching at the air.

The second plasma bolt hit the Marines scowling faceplate, shattering its eyelenses like glass, engulfing it in a cloud of igniting fragments and outwards-spreading gore a thick soup of smoke and blood that followed the enormous hulk as it tumbled backwards, crashing chaotically to the ground. It shivered and whined as the last vestiges of the armours power reserves expended into the air.

It died by degrees, flailing extremities slowing in their mad flexes until everything was silent. Kais wondered if anything would ever seem real again.

He retrieved the pathetic remains of his rifle and turned to the Aun, still seated in pain and exhaustion. His slender fingers brushed lightly across the wound on his head, exploring its severity. Like all ethereals, his face was longer than most taus, the gentle bisecting line of his scent orifice wider and more pronounced, lifted by the diamond-shaped ridge of bone at its centre. It was above this mysterious feature the identifying mark of his caste that the ugly wound marred his scalp. He winced momentarily, then his long features resolved into a glowing aspect of calmness and determination.

Here, Kais saw, was focus. Here was devotion to the tauva on a scale he could barely imagine. Here was faith, and it was contagious. Despite the Auns fragility he carried an invisible aura, a mantle of contentment that hung around him, allaying every one of Kaiss fears, soothing his turbulent thoughts. He lowered his gaze, awash with devotion and respect.

You have my thanks, Shasla, the ethereal purred, even his voice carrying a medicinal quality. In some quiet corner of his mind Kais felt manipulated, as if the mere presence of the Aun could blast away whatever shreds of individuality he might possess. But he couldnt rage against the violation he was powerless against it and, worse, he *enjoyed* it. Somehow, without even touching him, the Aun could reach inside his mind and show him how to belong.

Kais spoke into his comm, fighting to tear his gaze away from the luminous being before him.

Shasel? he rasped, voice dry.

LaKais! came Lushas reply, full of relief. We werent able to fix on you. We assumed Shasla: whats your status?

The Aun is free, Shasel. Hes wounded. We

Hold on, Kais. Were getting your signal again.

A green bar of characters within his HUD ominously absent for too long chimed to life, confirming the sensor contact. It felt like a tiny slice of Tau a portion of efficiency and logic lighting up this dark place of guela ugliness.

A thought occurred. ElLusha did the prisoners get out?

They did. LaYhol led them to safety through the ruins, despite his injuries. Lusha sounded amused. The porhui have got their hands on the footage

already, Im told. Kais smiled to himself, imagining Yhols proud, grinning features smeared across every bulletin screen back on Tau.

Our troops are holding out above ground, Lusha continued. The surveyor drones have picked up a collapsed cavern near your position. Well airlift you out.

The coordinates blinked to life in Kaiss vision, an impossible promise of freedom. He could barely allow himself to believe it was real.

Lushas voice suddenly didnt seem so far away at all. Youre coming home, Kais.

The dropship left the battle behind, pulling away through the lazy columns of smoke towards the edge of the crater valley. Below, Lusha could see the last vestiges of guela resistance surrendering their posts and dashing for the cover of the underground levels exposed by the orbital strike. It didnt matter. The pathfinder squads would pick them off one at a time, more through professional completism than any great need to cull the guela numbers. LaKais had done it.

He could hardly believe it. The youth had been out of contact, hidden to the dropships sensors behind countless layers of rock and steel. But the truth was there, displayed before his eyes on the monitors. Aunel Tau Kovash looking weak and wounded but alive, slowly but surely picking his way through the caverns towards freedom.

Lusha mumbled a litany of affirmation and watched the extraction point grow ever nearer.

A broken component thats how hed described Kais to the shaso. Had he been right? It hardly seemed to matter now. His gamble had paid off: the inexplicably bizarre guela scheme whatever it had been had been foiled and punished. Let that be an end to it.

But it wouldnt be. Oh, no. Hed seen the report, compiled and transmitted from the *Ores Tashvar* half a dec earlier. High above the smoking, debris-strewn plains of Dolumar IV, prowling out of the warp like a shoal of rampaging tpel sharks, the guela fleet had arrived.

III

08.5I HRS (SYS. LOCAL DOLUMAR IV, Ultima Seg. #4356/E)

A call to arms klaxon trilled, oscillating whoops that made the ears ring and the head pound. Footsteps and shouting voices hurtled along the iron lattice corridor, adding to the clamour of the grumbling generarium and the hissing, gurgling duct innards riddling every wall.

Governor Severus lurked in his plush cabin aboard the flagship *Enduring Blade* and forced himself to focus, biting his lip until he tasted blood. The ceaseless uproar of the warship was far from conducive to contemplation.

The journey from the surface had been comfortable, he supposed. The nobilite shuttle hed acquired and furnished years before had provided ample room, despite his companions comprising a hulking retinue of Space Marines.

Severus had first contacted the *Enduring Blade* a week previously. It was an irregular convention, hed discovered, for companies of Space Marines to be seconded aboard navy warships, spending their time in isolated training and meditation away from the crew. He dimly suspected it was all part of a goodwill scheme to minimise enmity between the characteristically arrogant Adeptus Astartes and the abundant personnel of the Battlefleet Ultima. It made little difference to him why they were aboard; the admiral had boasted in communication that full companies from the Raptors and Ultramarines Chapters had honoured his flagship with their presence, and Severus had wasted little time in formulating his petition.

The Raptors reputation for risk-taking and tenacity often taken to an almost reckless degree immediately endeared them to him. He could allow nothing, be it hesitation or pragmatism in the face of overwhelming odds, to stand in the way of his goal. Besides, the Ultramarines were famous for their application of righteousness and morality, characteristics that, in Severus's experience, bred a proclivity towards asking awkward questions.

Hed contacted Captain Mito, commander of the Raptors fifth company, aboard the *Enduring Blade*, requesting his Chapters aid with a politeness he struggled to maintain. He cited the Administratum documentation he held, expansively glorifying his plans to capture and study a tau ethereal, highlighting the tactical value that such a coup might hold. He played upon the captains piety, stressing the holy importance of purging xenogen life wherever it was found, assuring him that in understanding the Emperors enemies, His glorious will could best be served. All this and more he

communicated, hungry for the Marines involvement, and in the end he was rewarded with the pledged assistance of a tactical squad of Raptors. They arrived two days later, colossal warriors cut directly from the myths and legends of history, and he presided joyfully over their secret reception at his mansion in Lettica, immensely pleased at his own machinations.

The tip-off he had been expecting arrived two days later. Beyond the abyssal gulf surrounding the Dolumar system, the tau empire's outermost fringes were rich in colony worlds. There, left behind by the collapse of the Damocles Crusade, waged by the Imperium two hundred years previously, Severus had long ago discovered several scattered populations of humans, living peacefully beneath the patronage of the tau. He had been fostering contacts amongst the dispossessed communities ever since. In the end, greed had overcome any sentiments of loyalty to their new masters: he had learned of the impending arrival of an ethereal upon the colony world of Kuulan from one fortune-seeking fool, and had dispatched the Raptors immediately.

They performed admirably, despite the immense collateral damage they inflicted. And now the next phase of the plan was progressing equally as pleasingly: the tau response had been swift and devastating and, even better, Battlefleet Ultima had come running at his call. It was, he supposed, a minor annoyance that the tau ethereal had escaped, but he would rectify the problem one way or another. There were so many possibilities, so many potential outcomes, and every one made him a winner. Yes. Cause for celebration.

Not that he could afford the time for such things. He must concentrate; force himself to contain the energies a little longer. There had been too many leakages already.

A tiny voice in his mind, words hissing like blistering flesh, whispered: *Soon.*

Koro Natash Tyra, standing at the centre of his private swarm of control drones and sensor screens, worked his jaw thoughtfully. The serene bridge of the *Ores Tashvar* surrounded him in calmness, its crescent arrangement of smooth-moulded control consoles and benches typical of air caste sensibilities. Against the airy brightness of the command deck, with its serene curvature and uncluttered spaces, the main viewscreen sucked at his attention: the inky blackness of the void punctuated sparsely by whirling lights.

It was, he thought, like a cluster of jewels; intricate crystals of white and yellow fragmenting and tumbling, spinning their multifaceted surfaces through the planetary luminescence. A tiny sapphire blossomed in one corner of the screen, quickly swallowed behind a brief diamond flare, returning again to obsidian nothingness.

He watched as impossible swarms of guela attack craft obliterated the few

air caste fighters not grounded or damaged on the planet below, forcing his thoughts away from the abstract beauty of the sight. Every diamond, he knew, was a glowing missile exhaust, every polished sapphire the pulsefire of an outnumbered tau fighter; every crackling amber bead another life lost, another korui mouthing their deathshriek into the void.

The human fleet skulked nearby, a dispersing pack of kroot hounds circling a dying preything, hungry for carrion. Every one was a beaked slab of colossal dimensions, infested by the scuttling buttresses and spires characteristic of guela architecture, bristling with multi-tiered turrets and cannons. It could raze a planet, this ponderous clutch of predators.

Staying out of range of their main batteries was proving problematic, even for his faster, more manoeuvrable Gharial-class warship, but Tyra was unwilling to disengage from orbit until the very last second. The swarms of fighters disgorged from the warships bellies like flies lifting from rotten meat were a more immediate threat. Tyra cast a sad glance towards the schematic charts. Damage indicators pulsed calmly.

They will cripple us, he said beneath his breath, drain us, then move in to finish us.

Koro? His first officer, ElSiet, had overheard him.

Nothing, he said self-consciously, berating himself for giving voice to his anxiety.

On one screen a camera drone faithfully documented a cluster of fighters, jagged black and grey slashes of metal superimposed with IR-sensed fuel emissions like trails of blood, as they strafed the smooth hull of the warships juntas side. Twin furrows of las-fire etched ugly wounds across the tawny hull, puncturing blast shields and sending great spears of debris and writhing korla crewmen venting into space. It happened again on another screen. And another. It was happening all over. Tyra shook his head sadly and gritted his teeth, prepared to make any sacrifice to linger here a little longer.

The koruis poised over consoles nearby murmured incessantly, forever dispatching message drones and crew orders with quiet industry. Tyra allowed their reports to wash over him.

second wave hitting the upper plates

snaetas are targeting the engines

repair team to the tertiary core

toroq side of the fleets circling at the rear

major damage to the 5th and 17th weapons-pods

3rd phalanx move into 3rd phalanx? Come in?

It was an endless stream of negatives and failures, leaving Tyra sighing heavily as it went on and on and on. A small korvesa hovered up to his side and blinked a cyan light.

Report, he said glumly, anticipating more bad news.

Second hangar reports dropship *Tapran* docked, the tiny machine droned, resonant voice absurdly incongruous with its size. Aunel Tau Kovash is aboard.

Tyra turned in astonishment, staring at the hovering machine with wide eyes.

Confirm! he demanded, fighting to keep the excitement from his voice.

Aunel Tau Kovash is aboard, the drone repeated faithfully.

Helm! Tyra hissed, stabbing at control drones in a blur of activity. Set course for Rann spacedock. The ethereal is with us again.

Whatever relief the crew enjoyed quietly at the news was short-lived. ElSiet looked up from his console his dark expression effortlessly bursting Tyras bubble of excitement. Were under way, Koro he said, a minute frown betraying his concern. Theres damage to the toroq rear engine. The guela are matching speed.

Tyra felt his relief turning in on itself, washing over him in a wave of fear and disappointment. A tremor ran through the bridge as a strafing wave of guela fighters glided across the viewscreen.

One of the korui controllers pressed a chime, attracting his attention. Koro? We we have incoming

Incoming what?

Assault craft, Koro. Infantry assault craft.

Tyra let his eyes close slowly, feeling the enormity of the revelation soaking in. Dozens of expectant faces regarded him from every direction, arranged throughout the bridge in silent expectation. He flicked at a small control, opening a channel on the internal communicator. Its quiet peal echoed throughout the vessel.

All hands, he said, fighting against the wavering of his voice. Prepare to repel boarders.

Lusha watched Kais hurry away, the change of armour unable to disguise him amongst the other shaslas. He walked differently: a rolling, predatory gait that the others hadnt yet adopted, marking him out as plainly as any scarred wargear. Hed been changed by the mornings madness, there was no doubt about it. Exactly what he had become, Lusha sighed, remained to be seen.

Up and down the rounded corridors of the *Ores Tashvar* dilating emergency lights pulsed in time with the sonorous fluctuations of a siren. Maintenance drones, hovering high at the zenith of the hallway arch, prattled machine code and exchanged optic signals without slowing. Korla crewmen, tall frames appearing spiderlike amidst the clattering groups of fire warriors, hurried from place to place on myriad errands.

And always, every few heartbeats, came the jarring, ugly rush of another impact, another guela assault craft gouging its way through the warships hull, splitting apart at its prow in a toothless sneer of melta charges and jagged angle grinders to disgorge its huddled cargo of human soldiers. The quiet corridors of the tau vessel had become a battleground, and every able-bodied fire warrior had been sent into the fray to prevent more landings.

Except Lusha. He had more specific orders.

This way, Aunel, he said, his respectful tone unable to fully disguise his impatience. The ethereal too was watching Kais depart, his expression difficult to judge beneath the medipack tied delicately around his brow.

That shasla, he said, voice clouded. He carries a great weight.

Lusha tried to steer the ethereal away, Hes done well, Aunel.

Oh, I dont disagree, ElLusha But is it not said that even when broken, a sword may still cut?

Broken, Aunel? he replied, hearing his own words echoed in the allegory. Beyond repair, do you suppose?

The ethereal looked thoughtful. The blast door separating the pair from the rushing shaslas sealed with an organic breath. Kovash pursed his lips.

We shall see. Come.

Kovash turned towards the command deck elevator and strode away, robes billowing. Lusha hurried after him, gun cradled alertly at his side.

Im not convinced this is wise, Aunel. Your safety is paramount.

Nonetheless, ElLusha I wish to visit the bridge. I must speak with the koro.

I appreciate that, but

Good. Then you may act the bodyguard on the way there, if you must.

Orders of OUdas, Aunel, he said, enduring the ethereals stubbornness with a smile. Weve come too far to lose you now.

Hmm.

The elevator sealed behind them, delicate patterns of interlocking colours glowing on the interior walls as the carriage began to rise. Lusha let his eye wander across the ingenious skeins of pastel lattices, focusing the mind as it explored. Like everything aboard the *Tashvar*, even the fiosorral artworks were unsurpassed. The idea of guela troopers stamping their filth across the warships serene spaces filled him with disgust irrational and untaulike. Troubled at his internal impetuosity, his thoughts returned implacably to

Youre troubled by young LaKais, ElLusha.

Kovash was staring at him, dark eyes narrowed shrewdly. Lusha frowned, perplexed by his own transparency. In all his taucyrs of service hed met many ethereals and learned by and large to contain the impossible sense of awe induced by their presence. Still, rumours always abounded

Aunel Are you reading my mind?

Dont be ridiculous, ElLusha.

Then how

Think of me as a student of tau nature, Shasel. I watch things and he smiled thoughtfully, And follow my nose, as the guela would say. Your concern is palpable.

I knew his father. Hes I think hes lost, Aunel. He needs guidance.

The ethereal sighed, eyes closed. Shasel you know as well as I that one cannot be simply forced onto the pathway leading to the tauva.

I know, Aunel, but

If LaKais is lost, Shasel, his first step to recovery lies in wanting to be found.

And how does he do that?

Kovash smiled, a bitter, humourless grin that seemed incongruous amid his serene features. Carefully, ElLusha. Carefully.

The elevator walls dimmed as the carriage decelerated, doors slewing open with a sigh. The bridge opened up before them: an arena of dashing korlas and blurring drones. A barren-voiced AI, reacting to some hidden optical sensor, no doubt, declared, Aun on the bridge.

Immediately a knot of high-ranking kor- and shas-personnel surged forwards to envelop Kovash, bearing him away in the direction of the tired looking Koro in a polite clamour of questions and greetings. Lusha was left with his thoughts.

A distant roar broadcast another boarding impact, contact vibrations shuddering the length of the ship. A row of panels glowed orange, damage sensors emitting their sonorous warnings. A harassed shasvre seated at a command console diligently began directing troops towards the new insertion zone, knowing that every assault craft left undamaged, protruding from the hull like a knife hilt from a corpse, was a docking point for the vast guela troop carriers, winching into position even now.

Prognosis, Shasvre, Lusha grunted, keen to take command. The controller barely looked round.

A knives edge, Shasel. It could go either way.

How many breaches?

Twelve boarding groups. Eighteen more were destroyed in transit.

Lusha nodded, impressed. My compliments to the gunnery drones. What of our troops?

Not nearly enough of them, Shasel. Not nearly enough.

A firm hand landed on Lushas shoulder, surprising him. I thought I might find you here, ElLusha. Never one to take a well-earned rest, I recall.

He turned to face OUdas with a slight bow. As the One Path leads, he

said, pressing his hands together in respectful greeting.

The shaso dismissed the ritual with a wave of his hand. Enough of that, Shasel unless you want me to bow to you too. He smiled, regarding the knot of personnel across the bridge. Youve done well. I can scarcely believe the Aunel is amongst us again.

Guiltily, Lusha wondered if it had been worth it. Whatever happened to the equality of every tau? Would they have sent a warship to rescue *him*?

More of Kaiss bitterness, addling his mind. It was too easy to lose faith. Too easy to set aside the ideals of unity in a fit of acidic hubris.

The serene part of him the part he trusted whispered: Of course. Of course it was worth it. It was done in the name of the tauva.

In the path of the Greater Good, it said, all are equal. All are as important and as fallible. As worthy and as worthless. As a being, as a cog within the machine, the Aunel is as valuable as any of us. There is no injustice here.

But as a thing, as a receptacle of knowledge, his importance warrants *any* sacrifice.

Lusha breathed out with a clearer mind.

It had little to do with me, Shaso, he returned.

Ah, yes Our heroic shasla. I shouldnt have doubted your choice, ElLusha. You have my apologies.

Lusha dipped graciously, surprised. The shaso went on, waving him upright. Tell me where is this LaKais? I should like to meet him.

Lusha wanted to say: He wouldnt rest, Shaso. He wouldnt stop for reward or remonstrations. Hes out there killing, destroying, out of control.

He wanted to say: OUdas he is not like us.

He wanted to say: He is a weapon. We may aim him and set him loose but nothing more. We could never hope to control him.

He wanted to say: Were losing him.

He wanted to say: He is Montau.

But instead he avoided OUdass inquisitive stare and mumbled:

He fights on, Shaso, by the One Path. He fights on.

Kais primed the explosive, surrounded by guela bodies.

Some were alive still, injured and dying. Crooked legs hanging, useless. Shattered arms, spurting wounds, pallid faces. They writhed and groaned in their own fluids, leaving slick patterns across the deck. Some of them watched him, too weak to intervene. Finishing them off, hed decided, would be a waste of ammunition.

The surprise at his own survival was beginning to fade. Luck, skill, enthusiasm; it didnt matter why he lived whilst so many others had died. That he had survived, that he would continue to survive, was all that mattered. It

presented an unreal cocktail of pride and guilt to his mind, making him frown.

The pulse carbine was an improvement, at least. All the new wargear was. Exchanging the filthy shell of his old armour for the pristine new suit had been an almost miraculous process. Standing there in the dropship with Lusha and the Aun, hed seen himself as a kathryl desert reptile, heavy with the weight of its years, froned scales pitted and sore, unable to walk any further. In the hottest part of the rotaa the oldest of them would slump to the dry sand and split from head to toe, tattered bodies disgorging a single unblemished offspring into the arid air. Purity out of infirmity.

That was how it had felt. Rebirth. Shrugging off all the doubts, the maelstrom of uncertainty and dissatisfaction that raked at his mind falling away like a tangled morass of withered skin. He should have known it wouldnt be so easy.

So: new armour, new weapon. Hed slipped away through the besieged corridors of the *Ores Tashvar* a new tau, thoughts washed clean by the Auns inexplicable serenity, refreshed, renewed. Then Lusha and the Aun were left behind, the guela were everywhere and

And the killing started again.

He couldnt run from it. Couldnt hide it behind the cleansing influence of an ethereal or the guilty reassurances of siot lessons. Hed been a fool to believe he could expunge the rage with such little effort.

The winch dominating the rear section of the ugly guela assault craft gurgled and steamed, thick chains looping over and under the grinding drive-wheels. Outside, Kais knew, approaching inexorably, a troop-holder was guiding itself into position to dock. The assault craft contained elite storm-troopers, bursting into the deck to clear a space for their more numerous comrades aboard the carriers. Theyd failed, in this instance. He checked the remote detonator, reassured by its glowing yellow status light, and hurried from the craft.

The damage it had wrought upon the *Ores Tashvar* as it penetrated was astonishing: whole rooms crippled and caved-in, helpless korlas crushed or suffocated as entire walls split and shifted, floors buckling and bulging. And where the doors of the guela vessel itself little more than a hollow missile hung open at the prow, a strange metamorphosis occurred, the serrated bore head of the barge amalgamating almost organically with the undulating disorder of the warships wound. Black ceramite, melted by superheated charges, fused in a splattered vomit cast to the mangled edges of the beige and cream hallway. It was like passing through tumorous flesh, leaving an area of ugly foreign material and entering the wounded layers of once healthy tissue around it without being able to pinpoint exactly where the transition occurred.

Kais stepped from the angular vessel into the ruptured innards of the *Ores*

Tashvar, slipping on human blood and tripping on singed, unidentifiable bodies. The grenade launcher slung beneath the carbine, he reflected, had already proved indispensable.

That was when hed known. That was when hed felt the Montau devil clinging to his shoulders, refusing to let go. It was *in* him.

Hed thumbed the grenade trigger apprehensively as he approached his appointed reaction zone, still accustoming himself to the lighter weight of the carbine. The guela were everywhere, spilling from the barge like sludge, shouting and whooping as they came. The grenade had bounced off a wall with a clatter.

Then everything went outwards. There was no fire, no grandiose gout of flame or smoke roiling, mushroomlike, out of the grenade. There was just a wall an expanding sphere of force. Flesh came off bone and hurled itself across walls and ceilings. Bodies flipped in midair, slinking head over heels to collapse in boneless disarray. Shrapnel flickered like a galaxy. There was noise and fear and screams, and afterwards only groans.

And Kais had known, in that moment. Hed known that this was his purpose. He faced a choice, he saw now. He could pretend that every death was a step on the road to the tauva, some distant glowing impossibility on the horizon, or he could accept the truth: he killed because he could. Because he was good at it. Because because every death dimmed the glowering embers of his fathers eyes, boring into his mind.

You see? he wanted to scream, shrieking deep into that critical gaze from his memories, You see that I excel now? You see my gift?

But it wasnt a gift, it was a curse. And he knew it.

LaKais here, he grunted into the comm. Forward-core segment. The first charges are primed. Whenever youre ready, control.

Good work, fire warrior.

Kais recognised the voice. ElLusha?

Thats right. Still here, Shasla.

Kais grinned inside his helmet. Lushas presence, no matter how remote, was strangely reassuring.

Get clear of the area, the voice rasped. We need to voidseal before detonating. Theres another impact point on the next level up.

On my way.

Kais took a final look at the riot of guela bodies littering the floor and headed for the portal. It ghosted shut behind him, locking with a clang.

The charges detonated and everything went white.

A servitor twitched its head, owl-like. Its taut skin, stretched to near-transparency over the metal latticework of fibres and components riddling its

skull, bunched in ugly dumps as it affected a frown some vestigial impulse remaining from the machine hosts previous life as a living human.

Fleet Admiral Constantine had learned long ago to translate the foibles of his staff even those not blessed with sentience. Report, he grunted.

Assault craft #3/G9 destroyed, the servitor droned, voice deriving ghoulishly from a speaker tube on its shoulder. Winch assembly compromised. Troop carrier *Sillandrus* detached and free-floating. Contact severed. Assumption of all hands lost.

Constantine almost spat. That was the sixth boarding point compromised within as many minutes. He lifted his peaked cap to smooth his silver hair and stared around the control deck with a sigh. Immense banks of copper-piped gauges and obsidian-panelled switch consoles blinked and hissed, dutifully manned by a menagerie of bio-machine servitors and gaudily dressed officers. The enormous logic engines rising in stacks to either side were tended by chanting tech-priests and crewmen, work seats on vertical rails slumping and ratcheting their way up and down, twitching datum drones exchanging nonsensical binary conversations. To one side surveyor screens glittered and strobed, to the other weapons data was scrutinised and processed by watch officers.

It was pandemonium to the untrained eye, but all conducted in hushed tones and infused with the ghostly scent of incense and myrrh.

The boarding craft, he knew, were woefully outdated. Hed seen stock footage of the assault boats of the Segmentum Obscura in action, a smooth and deadly deployment of resources that left little room for enemy defence. The resources of the Fleet Ultima were worryingly behind the times.

Fury interceptor, report, Constantine barked. A pale-faced ensign looked up guiltily.

Seventy per cent operational, sir. Sixty-five per cent for the Starhawks.

So whys that warp-damned thing still moving? Their engines should be crippled by now!

Wing Commander Keamil says there are enemy squadrons rejoining from the surface. Theyre holding the bombers up, sir.

You tell Keamil that if that bloody ship isnt powerless and coasting within the hour Ill be holding *him* up on a charge of professional inadequacy. Clear?

Sir.

Good. Now. Infantry command.

An officer saluted. Sir. Heavy resistance, as anticipated. If we can land a troop carrier or two itll turn the tables.

If, commander?

When, sir.

Better. What about our special delivery?

A cowed tech-priest stood with a perfunctory nod. Adept Yenus encountered some problems. It seems the machina locarus is somewhat decayed and the teleport array couldnt adequately secure a lo

Adept Im not remotely interested. Just tell me if it worked.

Partially, admiral. We believe two adepts survived the transmission and are in position.

They have protection?

The personnel officer chimed in smartly. Of course, sir. The storm-troopers are converging on their position and the areas sealed with a tri-lock.

Hmm. Constantine nodded minutely the nearest he ever came to demonstrating his satisfaction. And what about these disturbances I keep hearing about? Commissar Varadiels reports arent reassuring.

The officer rubbed his eyes and shook his head. Nothing concrete, sir. Just some missing ratings scum and a lot of rumours. Too much dreamstimm amongst the conscripts and not enough whipping, if you ask me

I didnt. I want armsmen on full alert. If theres something going on aboard my ship I want to know abo

He was interrupted by a commotion from the entranceway. A knot of ensigns were restraining a tall figure with as much decorum as they could muster.

let me through, warp take you! a whinnying voice demanded. Ive been kept waiting quite long enough!

Sir, you cant go on the bri

Dont you dare tell me what I cant do, you odious little creature! Do you know who I am?

Yes, sir, bu

Constantine rolled his eyes. Let him through.

The ensigns shrank back. Governor Severus sneered at them victoriously, framed by the colossal archway from the chapel hold beyond the command deck. He brushed himself down, making a show of his ermine-collared greatcoat, and stalked forwards. Constantine was reminded of a strutting peacock, all gaudy colours and self-assurance. He raised an irritated eyebrow.

Ah, admiral, the governor neighed, saluting with insincere pomposity. I was beginning to doubt you were actually aboard.

Some of us have things to do, Severus.

And some of us have been kept waiting like common ratings.

Constantine sighed, fighting a migraine. I havent got time for an aristocratic tantrum, he snapped. What do you want? Make it quick.

I demand to know how the battle fares.

Request denied. Get off my bridge.

Severus almost roared, stalking forwards until he was face to face with

Constantine. Admiral! This system every planet, moon, throne-loathed lump of rock and all the space between them falls under my jurisdiction! You *will* keep me apprised of the situation!

Constantines temper, legendarily short at the best of times, snapped.

Fine. The situation, governor, is that on your behalf Im wasting time and men on a conflict that serves no purpose. I might remind you that the fleet arrived here under the impression that there was an invasion underway. Take a look at the surveyors, governor. The godless bastards cant wait to get away!

So the situation, sir, is that I wont risk damaging my fleet for the sake of your wounded pride, and until we can slow them down enough to get in some broadsides were twiddling our thumbs.

Severus blanched in the face of Constantines fury, leaning away involuntarily. This is insubordination! I demand a full-scale assault!

The admiral barely paused for breath, stabbing his finger against the governors chest with a snarl. Governor, this ship is three millennia old. Its warspirit has fought in more campaigns than you could imagine and the inscriptions of its victories cover every last wall of the chapel you just passed through. It carries innumerable souls aboard and of all of them, only ones word is law. Make no mistake, governor: it is not yours. Do not presume to give me orders aboard my own vessel.

Now. All you need to know is that Im going to capture that bulbous piece of orkspoor xenotech out there, kill every last grey-skinned abomination onboard and send it to the Adeptus Mechanicus for study with a gold ribbon and the compliments of the navy. The situation, therefore, is that everything is under control, we shall prevail and you neednt concern yourself with it a moment longer.

Now kindly remove your bloated carcass from my command deck or, governor or not, Ill have you shot for timewasting. Is that clear?

The chamber plunged into astonished silence.

Severus rallied magnificently, gashing open his face with an indignant sneer. Eminently.

Good. Now get off my bridge.

Severus turned and stalked away, all eyes following him. Something occurred to him and he turned with a hungry smile. Oh, admiral, he said, theres one other thing.

Constantine grunted. Astonish me.

I want my prisoner back.

You w Constantine didnt know whether to roar with laughter or throttle the obnoxious fool. Youre unbelievable he growled. Get him off my bridge! Now! The ensigns stepped forwards menacingly, but Severus wouldnt budge.

Im quite serious, admiral. His voice adopted a formal tone. I was

commissioned by the Administratum, in conjunction with the Officio Xenobiologica, to capture and study a high-ranking tau ethereal. He pushed a hand into his pocket and extracted a thick wedge of papers, all of them marked by the winged black seal of the administratum. This isn't some vanity project to keep me amused, admiral. It's all here: official tactical sanctions and permissions, resource allocations, requisitioning documents. I think you'll find I'm perfectly within my rights to demand your assistance in this matter. See for yourself. He proffered the wad with a sly grin, enjoying himself.

Constantine bit his tongue in fury. Commissioned? he managed to choke, resisting the urge to splutter the governor's smug grin all over the deck.

Well I admit it was my idea, he grinned, but evidently the proposal went down well with the robes on Terra. They've been most agreeable.

And you didn't think to tell me this before?

Need to know, admiral. You know how it works.

Constantine had to concentrate hard to prevent himself from shouting. You get off my bridge, he whispered. Right now.

Severus gave a friendly grin. One tau ethereal, unharmed. I'll expect delivery by the end of the day. And don't worry about the gold ribbon, admiral, presentation isn't everything. I'll be in my cabin if you need me.

He walked out humming cheerfully.

Constantine counted to twenty before he trusted himself to talk.

Adept Borial? he said, keeping his voice calm. The robed tech-priest stood obediently. Get that teleporter repaired. I want the wretched thing operational within the hour.

The priest nodded quickly, knowing better than to protest. Constantine stroked his chin thoughtfully. And send someone down to the seventeenth starboard vertex. The solitarium complex. Tell *them* I want volunteers.

An ensign scurried to comply.

Right. The admiral nodded, staring around the industrious scene before him. Would someone please give me some good news?

The servitor seated to his left frowned, listening to a comm signal in its ear.

Barge #15/F0 destroyed, it droned. Winch assembly compromised.

The admiral shot it in the head with his exquisitely crafted pistol and was immensely satisfied to find that it made him feel much, much better.

The comm chimed to life.

Shasla? That reports just been confirmed. Definite enemy presence in the engine bay. Make for the rally point off the main promenade. I'll try and divert some troops for a regroup. I want as many units as possible heading for the power core.

On my way, Shasel.

Kais prowled through the corridors of the *Ores Tashvar*, stepping over unrecognisable bodies of tau and guela alike, thinking of the past.

Four taucyrs. Four taucyrs since he traded the white training regs of the battledome for the tawny plates and crested helmet of a fire warrior. Four taucyrs since losing the Saal training rank epithet and becoming LaKais.

Four taucyrs of feigned alertness, escorting diplomats on mundane trade agreements and ceremonial engagements. Four taucyrs of policing the virtually crime-free streets of Tau, marching along its polished thoroughfares to protect its bright towers and domes from the terrors of antisocial behaviour. In all that time, other than during firearms training or ritualised pulse salute duties, hed fired his weapon once. Just once.

It had been during a porvre expedition to the kroot sept of Queh-quih. An enterprising water caste trader (whose name hed long since forgotten) had identified a market for hand-crafted kroot jewellery (rusticity being in vogue at the time) and had arranged a trade visit. Naturally, being a porvre, the shrewd merchant understood the importance of first impressions, opting to include two shaslas with his retinue. The kroot, Kais was told, would appreciate the display of strength.

He and Ju had been selected at random by some Shasartol AI, and dispatched aboard the merchant vessel *Porcreta Tai*. It had been a journey of new experiences: the wonder of void travel, the immaculate corridors of the vessel, the awkward lurch of a warp-hop and the attendant relief at exiting in open space rather than in the heart of some star. For all their ingenuity, the earth caste scientists had thus far been unable to unravel the mysteries of the warp, and even the brief dips into unreality that the bravest koros undertook were fraught with danger.

And then the wonder of a new world, to walk amongst the tall, savage kroot with their chittering, squalling language of clicks and squawks, to feel their pinprick eyes watching with something between suspicion and respect these were experiences Kais and Ju would discuss and recollect for taucyrs thereafter.

The expedition had lasted a five-rotaa and was, in the end, disastrous. The porvre was growing impatient with the incessant humidity of the world; the air caste crew of the *Porcreta Tai*, ordered to remain on the surface out of deference for the kroots inexplicable dislike of vessels orbiting their planet, were suffering the effects of prolonged gravity exposure on their frail bodies. Ju was bemoaning the lack of porhui broadcasts which might help her to meditate. Kais hadnt eaten a decent ration in three rotaa after witnessing the kroots culinary preparations. And to top it all, the promised jewellery had turned out to be a selection of whittled bone fragments and colourful feathers.

It was not going well.

The final straw came on the sixth rotaa during a visit to the produce market. The porvre spotted a stall in the distance selling trinkets and baubles and, in a fit of desperation, all but sprinted to inspect the wares. Kais and Ju were forced to hurry after their supposed protectee, stifling their irritation at his spontaneity.

At which point the porvre, in his haste, stamped on the paw of a kroothound basking in the sun and found himself the unwitting victim of one hungry vengeful predator. Cackling a birdlike shriek, the creature swatted the merchants legs aside with a single jagged claw and bounded onto his back.

Pandemonium ensued.

The porvre screamed, the kroot tribesmen nearby leaped forwards, the hound opened its serrated beak to crush its flailing victims skull and Kais and Ju shot it, once each.

Afterwards, of course, it had been made perfectly clear that killing the tribal shapers favourite warhound notorious for its playful rough-and-tumble with strangers was not a clever way of endearing oneself to the tribe. The *Porcreta Tax* left a dec later, in disgrace.

And even though Kais and Ju had laughed at the absurd error afterwards, hed never forget that moment when the weapon lurched in his hands, thrumming induction field ejecting a single tumbling particle at impossible velocity, opening up in a blue teardrop of plasma in midair. Hed never forget the impart on the creatures flank, the initial flare of energy transfer, the scorched fragments of flesh and bone detonating outwards as the squealing beast shuddered aside. Hed never forget the stink of burned flesh.

Except that he had.

Four taucyrs of pretending to be a warrior and now now where was he? Stalking his way through his own vessel, fighting a guerrilla battle throughout the once serene living spaces and recreation suites of the *Ores Tashvar*, ignoring the stench of singed bodies, picking off humans as they sprinted hither and thither in disorder, killing and killing and killing. The kroothound was barely a memory anymore, the horror of its destruction eclipsed a hundredfold by the insanity of a single rotaa.

The Trial by Fire, they called it. After four taucyrs of service a shasla would face the judgement of an examining commander to determine their progression of rank, following a demonstration of ability. Most Trials were artificial affairs: a complex series of simulations, courses and non-lethal combat in the battledomes. They were regarded as festivals; holidays during which all castes would come together in the colossal auditoria to cheer and speculate upon which warriors would be deemed worthy of promotion. There was no sense of success or failure to remain a shasla was without dishonour, a

celebration of discovering ones niche and serving the tauva in the best possible fashion.

But there had always been incidents of the trials being eclipsed by external hostilities, and ever pragmatic the Shasartol saw no reason not to make use of the young shaslas. They could fight for the Greater Good whilst being judged; it was in many ways a purer test of their abilities.

Sooner or later, once all this insanity was over, a critical shasvre would sit and review the captured footage from each shaslas helmet-optics, poring over the sensory information, their reactions, their movements their decisions.

Kais frowned. Someone would judge him, too. How would they see his actions? Would they see the effectiveness, the successes, the victories? Or would they see the racing heart and the enjoyment? Would they look through his eyes upon his works and see the skill of a shasui, or the savagery of the Montau?

Kais turned a corner and froze, the telltale light spillage of flickering gunfire dancing across a wall nearby. He twisted, keeping the carbine between him and the wide glass-fronted chamber at his side.

A vision of hell opened up before his eyes. On the other side of the glass the regroup point was under attack. A knot of tau pathfinders lightly armed scouts with little of the plate armour a line warrior sported exchanged close fire with a black tide of guela troopers, their pale skin invisible beneath bulbous airmasks and flak jackets. Kais hurried to find the connecting door to the chamber, helplessly watching the combat as if on a porhui screen.

The shaslas were being cut down one by one, flipped from their meagre cover by the chattering guela weapons then pulverised, disintegrating in liquid disarray, screams cut short. The colliding shells created a shivering hailstorm of ricochets across the floor, some even punching at the great viewing gallery windows that opened up to the void beyond, sending tiny fissures scuttling across the surface.

Kais spotted the chamber doorway from the promenade and sprinted forwards, racking his grenade launcher hungrily. This time he could enjoy the violence, safe in the knowledge that he was helping his comrades. This time there'd be no guilt.

The door slid closed with a rasp, blocking his entry. Kais skidded to a halt before it, confused.

Shasel? he commed, bewildered, Shasel you need to open this door!

Its on override, Kais. Standby Kais thought he heard Lusha hiss lightly, Oh, by the path.

Shasel?

The AIs detected a breach.

A I dont unders

The cobweb of shatterlines scampering across the gallery windows blossomed, sudden rosettes of gossamer lurching into existence and, just as quickly, vanishing. The windows belched outwards into nothingness.

One raikor the room was a battleground: overturned arc benches and fragmented fiosorral sculptures lying in disarray; the next, emptiness. There was the briefest impression of speed, a blur of rushing shapes and clutching limbs, then only the silent vastness of vacuum. A body tumbled serenely past the yawning windows, chest caved in, eyes bulging, trailing frozen blood-crystals like a necklace of diamonds.

Kais gagged inside his helmet, backing away from the awful vision. The enormity of the destruction, the sudden, natural power of it-He *envied it*.

L-laKais Lusha sounded shaken. Theres no time. You have to get to the engine bay.

They. Theyre all gone.

LaKais. Do you hear me?

Theyre gone. All of them.

LaKais!

He snapped back to reality with a jolt, tearing his eyes away from the scene. That split-second vision of rushing bodies, venting air it wouldnt leave his mind.

You can do this, Kais.

I dont know, Shasel. These decks are crawling Its too much

The other cadres are engaged elsewhere, Shasla. Well reroute as soon as we can. A strange taint entered Lushas voice fear, perhaps? Or guilt? You can do this, he repeated, sighing.

Kais frowned, feeling the fear creeping into him again. Not the conventional horror of death or injury or pain, rather the fear of overreaching; the fear of uninhibited insanity, the fear of once again revelling in his own unwanted appetite for destruction. He hadnt asked to be a killer, hadnt strived all his life to develop the rage and the spite that, unbidden, came naturally to him. He wanted to scream: *Its not fair!*

With every human they sent him against it became harder to pretend that he was doing it for them, doing it for their tauva, doing it for their Greater Good, their pure racial goal that eluded him with infuriating intangibility. Every time he killed for them, it became harder to deny that really, secretly, he was doing it for himself.

Kais searched for words, unable to contain the turmoil any longer.

Shasel?

Yes, Shasla?

Why me?

Lusha sounded concerned. What do you mean?

Why Why do I have to be the one to His voice faltered. The words didnt sound right; to express them could only expose the selfishness at their heart. Im damning myself! he cried, a bubble of uncertainly and rage puncturing obscenely in his soul.

Lusha took a long time to answer.

Youre the only one who can do this, LaKais.

But

Fire warrior! Nobody ever pretended it would be easy.

Kais hung his head. Yes, Shasel. There was nothing else he could say.

Get to the power core, Shasla. Youre our only hope.

Kaiss hand rested on the wafer in its pouch.

No expansion without equilibrium.

No conquest without control

Military words. Aggressive words. Expansion, conquest. Victory, violence. But always tempered by control, by balance.

Maybe it deserved another try. He took a deep breath, focused his mind upon an ideal far greater than he could hope to appreciate, and scuttled away across the promenade.

Captain Bortailis Seylind had enjoyed a long and eventful career.

He received his military commission at the early age of nineteen and was thrust quickly into the terrifying world of combat service. He saw active duty on the Fell Core hiveworld when the rebellion began; he assisted in the mop-up operation after the Space Marines had dealt with the genestealer infestation; he was there when the first nid spores landed and he personally oversaw the clearance of Hive Tertius after the vent system was breached. He was in orbit, looking down, when the Exterminatus virus-bomb punctured the atmosphere of the doomed planet.

At twenty-three he was transplanted from the 35th Octobian Regiment of the Imperial Guard to the StormTroop Assault-core, attached to the Battlefleet Ultima (Secundus) as an experimental specialist regiment of boarding infantry guards. The brutal complexities of ship warfare became his specialised field.

Under Nobilite Captain Ferringus he took part in no fewer than thirteen major boarding actions in his first few years: a variety of rogue traders and suspected pirate craft proving a more-than-trying opportunity to hone the storm-troopers abilities. He received two citations for bravery, a medal for distinguished service and the cherished Crozius Ultima as a personal recognition of his courage under fire. By his twenty-eighth birthday the encroaching fragments of the Tyranid hive fleet Kraken were pushing before them all manner of scum: an ork flotilla, badly crippled by some recent encounter with the hive swarms, was to prove his first engagement with xeno

troops. The assault craft scythed into the ineffectual hulls of the greenskin ships and Seylind received a further citation in the carefully executed cleansing of the flotilla that followed.

By the time he was thirty-five, Seylind had been promoted to captain, decorated twice more for his cool-headedness and efficiency, had personally founded three more regiments of storm-troopers for assignment aboard other fleets in other Segmenta, had conducted successful boarding missions against the orks, the eldar and three stealer-infested space hulks; had received the gratitude of Governor Quotho following the elimination of a mercenary invasion force, and had been personally singled out to oversee the extension of the storm-trooper regiments to the Battlefleet Ultima Primus.

He was received by Admiral Constantine of the *Enduring Blade* two weeks after his thirty-sixth birthday, earning a further service medal and a pleasant evening in the officers mess, courtesy of the navis nobilite. Life was good.

Three weeks into the new commission, with much of the nascent regiment still comprised of green-around-the-gills conscripts, the opportunity to add the tau to his burgeoning list of defeated enemies was forced upon him. The boarding had been a difficult affair and resistance was well-organised and heavy, but he was confident. The insertion of tech-priests into the engine bay had been fraught with difficulties, but malfunctions aside, the teleporter had succeeded in delivering a pair of adepts. With his two most trusted secondaries, Seylind had occupied the surrounding decks, sealed the engine bay with a tri-lock (his third of which nestled securely in his utility holster) and could now continue with the pressing business of co-ordinating the infiltration of the vessel. Yes he had reason to be confident. With foresight and planning, no obstacle was insurmountable.

There'd be another medal in this one, he was certain. Perhaps even a promotion.

He smiled, arming his hellgun happily.

Someone shot him in the gut.

As the colour went out of his world, he felt gloved alien hands rummaging in the utility holster at his hip.

Adept Natsan, Reverus Illumina of Mars, magos of the Cult Deus-Mechanicus, second-level student of xenotech and mechanicus heretica, beneficiary of the *Puritens* lobotomy and recipient of no fewer than seventeen Spiritu-Mechanica surgical augmentations, was annoyed to notice he was bleeding heavily. He concentrated, internally arresting the flow of blood to his left upper limb, cauterising the wound with an acetylene lamp attached to his right elbow and watching as the neatly sliced flesh scarred over and cooked.

Matter transmission had proved contrary to his expectations. Hed speculated upon a gravitic shift as the body adjusted between two localities in overlapping warp space, hypothesised upon the presence of emitted waste energy, sound and heat, and theorized upon the effects of matter occluded by existing dense material upon transmission.

He had not expected a blinding discharge of light, a sharp tug in all directions at once, the bewildering sensation of falling, then a coalescing series of sensory feedbacks containing screams, fountaining blood and the unpalatable aroma of singed hair. It didnt take him long to conclude, in fact, that something had gone wrong.

The initial displace party had comprised five adepts of his order, several dozen armed servo skulls and a trio of combat servitors to provide a clearance security zone. The servo skulls, at least, had been delivered safely.

The servitors had arrived all at once in the same spot: a fascinating arrangement of meat and metal, fused together and segueing from state to state apparently at random. It had mewed twice, coughed, then toppled sideways with a lurch and in as much as it had ever been alive died.

Adepts Armill and Nyssen had, it would appear, been reconstituted beyond the limit of the locarus engine; pulped flesh and blood scattered in a perfect circle around the boundary of the safe zone. This hypothesis would seem to explain the damage to his own body: he estimated thirty-five per cent of his left limb had been breaching the safety perimeter upon materialisation, neatly amputating it below the elbow. Had he any pain centres remaining he suspected, the injury would be agonising.

Adept Idows fate had been stranger still. Natsan had theorized that the locarus safe zone had overlapped part of the tau engine bays bulkhead, delivering Idow into the wall. His astonished features, flayed to a ruddy red liquescence and splattered by molten metal, leaned from the structural panel as if breaking the surface of a vertical pool.

So, alone amongst the sentient transportees, he and Adept Tertius Rolan had survived the transition from the *Enduring Blade* to the alien vessel. Indignity upon indignity, it had fallen to them, lacking the combat servitors, to defend themselves against the xenogens a tiresome business more suited to the plebeians of the Imperial guard, had they been present. Still, the task was quickly completed; those tau specimens already inhabiting the cavernous powercore were a craven breed of gangly air caste crew, easy pickings for his sanctified plasma pistol.

Thankfully, the delay had been nominal. Within minutes the storm-troopers from the first assault craft had converged on his position, completing his carefully prepared security arrangements.

The door into the tiered chamber had been sealed as comprehensively as

was possible, preventing any tau troopers from entering. As far as Imperial intelligence was aware, the xenos possessed no teleport analogue technology, so there'd be no danger from that direction. Further, he had released two dozen of the armed servo-skulls into the ductways around the enginebay to patrol against any surreptitious entry from that quarter.

The storm-troopers were deployed carefully across the lower levels of the power core, taking up position around the trunklike pillar at its centre which, he guessed, was the taus bizarre equivalent of a generarium reactor. The gantries and mezzanines which rose in platformed tiers around it had taken a while to climb in his hunt for a central console, his augmented frame not designed for such athletic exertion. The view from the summit was breathtaking.

And finally, as if any living creature could penetrate so far, the upper levels of the construct, where he and Adept Rolan swiftly and silently worked to cripple the vessels engines and decrypt its datavised secrets, were bordered by a coruscating energy field. Natsans aggressive assault upon the vessels AI, a heretical intelligence that would be purged the instant it was no longer required, had yielded fruit quickly: he'd identified and implemented the shield device as a final, utterly impenetrable defence.

Thus reassured, he gathered the full enormity of his mental faculties reasoning that such comprehensive security arrangements negated any need to spend time considering his safety and focused on the console before him. The datum drones at his side blinked and chattered, ferociously eating away at the AIs defences. The language decryption paradigm running in Natsans head decoded a string of characters and he stabbed at a sequence of controls, exposing yet another level of sophistication. Like some energistic equivalent of the gantry surrounding the powercore, the ships logic engine was a structured gem: a perfectly aligned arrangement of operative tiers and commands, symmetrical and cohesive. Had his sense of awe been complete, he suspected, he might actually be impressed by the technologys complexity. As it was, the *puritens* surgery released a stream of disapproving endorphins into his mind, filling him with revulsion and making him all the more aware of the xenogens blatant disregard for the proper obeisance owed to the Machine God.

To his side, Adept Rolan controlled a group of servo-skulls as they swarmed around the thrumming engine pile at the centre of the tier stack. The technology contained within that single pillar of silent componentry was utterly foreign, an impure antithesis of the arcane knowledge of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Natsans brief glimpse through a viewing portal had raised more questions than it provided answers, revealing a luminous green liquid gas swirling with convection currents and speckled by drifting, glowing particles

of matter. When the tau vessel was captured he would relish uncovering its secrets.

So rigid was the careful distribution of his concentration that he was completely oblivious to the heavy clang of the engine bay doors unlocking, drifting open with a rasp. His ears' sensory ganglia improved years earlier by cranial implants competently recorded the unmistakable sounds of hellguns chattering angrily, but his consciousness was busy elsewhere and the harsh frequencies went unprocessed.

So immersed was he in his analysis of the AI systems, that only when the faint blue light of the energy shield collapsed upon itself and faded to nothing did he allocate a corner of his processing ability to analysing the new situation. He regarded his surroundings suspiciously, quickly noting the wrecked corpses of storm-troopers littering the chambers floor, and the console venting smoke on the next level down. He realised too late that the energy shield was not quite the impenetrable protection he'd surmised.

Before he could consider the new scenario in depth, a bipedal figure surged up the ramp onto the top tier and raised a weapon. Natsan grudgingly allowed his entire mind to drop the complex algorithms it had been studying and concentrated upon the new threat.

He drew his pistol.

Kais was up and sprinting before he had time to think.

There were two of them, he saw, and they were fast. They were armed and firing in a heartbeat, so alike in their movements they could have been twin linked machines or mirror reflections. They shifted in a rolling gaggle of insect jerks, metal pitted heads clicking like broken engines as they tracked him, eyes twinkling from the darkness beneath their black robes.

Kais thumbed a thirty-raikan delay on a grenade and rolled it silently towards them, scurrying for cover. He pushed his armoured shoulder into the ground and rolled towards a dip in the mezzanine floor; radiant orbs of plasma impacting all around, splattering liquid metal across the dome of his helmet. The cover swallowed him up and he fought the temptation to lurk there, catching his breath.

Instead he sprinted onwards, sensing the fiotak haemorrhaging behind him in an eruption of plasma and shrapnel. Scampering across the control tier, he caught a brief glimpse of black robes to his left and fired a ragged cluster of pulses towards them, earning a satisfying belch of smoke and sparks and forcing the guela back behind the shoanores energy stack, near to where he'd secreted the grenade. Kais winced inside his helmet: a single breach of the core would not only cripple the ship's movement but risked destroying the entire lower segments of the vessel.

As if testing his fears, the grenade detonated.

The first guela, the one with slightly less artificial features and two complete arms, was taken by surprise, somersaulting backwards on the crest of the Shockwave, legs detaching in a tracery of mechanical joints and ribbon sliced flesh. It screamed at the apex of its impromptu flight and Kais, never staying still for a moment, pumped two carbine rounds into its jerking torso before it had even slapped into the deck. It landed with a crack and flipped backwards off the tier. Every time it landed it bounced outwards, shedding chunks of biotech and flesh.

Kais watched it all the way, resisting the smile forming around his lips. The energy pillar, he noticed with relief, was undamaged.

The other guela, one arm ending in a scar tissue clump, lurched from the tangled wreckage in a crescendo of creaking parts and chittering components. Its shrapnel shredded face, welts of flesh hanging loose from the cable-studded bone beneath, stared ghoulishly. It was a lurching remnant of a being, neither crying out in agony or sneering in pain-dampening insanity at its injuries. But its eyes its eyes were cold and dead mechanical orbs of ice and metal. It raised the plasma pistol in a single angle-perfect movement, weapon fixating on Kais faster than he could ever hope to react. It pulled the trigger.

Kais wondered abstractly, in that miniscule moment before he died, whether he was looking at the guela vision of the tauva.

For the tau, he thought, the One Path is a victory over individuality. It is gestalt over self, rationality over impulse, logic over spontaneity, focus over Montau

But this thing, this creature with a scarred brain and a body more metallic than organic, this thing is rationality, it is logic, it is tauva

Is that what were trying to become, he asked himself? Painless, fearless, passionless Monsters?

The plasma pistol made a sound.

Fzzk.

The guela tilted its head and squeezed the trigger again. A row of warning icons illuminated in fiery red along the bottom of Kaiss HUD, detecting a surge of energy nearby. He squinted at the guela pistol, heart racing. A single sliver of shrapnel had gouged itself into the firing mechanism at the base of the weapons barrel, smoking with a burgeoning hiss.

The guela vanished beneath a cloud of fire, flames billowing outwards and hurling Kais to the floor. Unvented promethium ignited in a rush, an inverted waterfall of thermal fury that gushed over him and boiled upwards to lash impotently against the chamber ceiling.

He stooped to his feet when the inferno finally abated, methodically checking for injuries. The guela priest stood as it had been before the explosion, skin peeling back, extended gun arm obliterated at the shoulder, a rarified sculpture with charred skin. Kais, shaking his head to clear the exhaustion, thought its blackening features seemed somehow interested, as though analysing its own immolation. Its expression of scrutiny remained until its silvery eyes melted and the flames burned through from the inside of its skull.

Kais stood and watched it until it flopped to the floor and was still. He watched until the cables and tubules running throughout its frame began to liquefy and puddle around it. He watched until the reinforcements arrived and Lusha voxed him with an almost paternal expression of congratulation.

He stood and watched the flickering, crumbling husk until it atomised and gusted away, and as he watched he wondered which was worse: to surrender to rage or to become a living machine?

He didn't know the answer.

Koro Natash Tyra took a final glance at the *Tashvars* status display, patted Korel Siet fondly on the shoulder to finalise the temporary delegation of command and hurried off the bridge into the boardroom. The *Aunchiagor* was already underway.

The origins of the ceremony were clearly prescribed in the datatexts of Kilto and it had remained almost unchanged in the two and a half thousand taucyrs since its inception. It was a product of the time of Montau, before the Auns came, when the tribes of Tau balanced on the very verge of self destruction.

As history had recorded, at the siege of Fiotaun, when the fate of an entire species hung precariously in the balance, where only a miracle could have prevented the emergence of an age of anarchy and turmoil, something impossible occurred.

There had been lights, glimpsed dimly around the distant mountaintops, for three rotaas. Stories spread amongst the armies of strange figures lurking in the mist of the hills, colourful attire and fluted limbs melting and capering through the haze. In the heat of battle few of the tribes gave any credence to the tales, stubbornly ignoring the phenomena that pulsed in the night sky, bending all their attention upon the hostilities that were tearing their world apart. On the final day the wind had carried strange resonances, swept aloft from the heights of the jagged peaks. They sounded, the Kilto histories recorded, like a choir of voices, raised in a song of impossible beauty.

And then the Auns had appeared. They came slowly, calmly barefooted and unsullied by the hate and suspicion of their astonished brethren. They

stepped between the campfires of the besieging army and appeared as if from nowhere within the impassable walls of the city.

And they talked. And as they talked, the tribes listened. They listened and they wondered, and they were filled with awe and reverence for these strange, graceful beings with their words of unity and progress.

And the gates of Fiotaun opened, so the legend went, and the tribes met unarmed for the first time, and their leaders were seated at a mighty round table named ChiaGor. And the Auns talked until the spokesmen of the tribes summoned the courage to participate. And slowly, so gradually that even the fiery plains tribes were gently coaxed into harmony, the tauva was born.

And so it had remained. The Aunchiagor had become a sensible paradigm for the meeting of the castes: wherever the five aspect pathways of the race were represented its simple procedures were rigidly observed. The table was a ring a halo of artfully decorated materials, each appropriate to a single caste. The four elemental classes each occupied a quarter of the rings boundary, a single speaker surrounded by lesser aides and advisors.

Tyra took his place at the centre of the air caste segment, a polished, voidlike swathe of dark tinted moriin-resin, filled with icy impurities and glimmering nebulae of coloured dyes, and nodded to each of the other top ranking delegates in turn.

To his left, rigidly composed as if fresh from the parade-ground, Shaso Udas drummed his fingers on the fire caste tabletop segment, a rough-hewn conglomerate of ruby and amber, and pursed his lips. Two shasvres stood to attention on either side of him.

To Tyras right sat the vessels earth caste representatives, squat and wide with flat, open faces and bulky, simple clothing. At their centre was Fioel Boran, clutching a data wafer in his extraordinary artificial arm, trceries of silver and gold decorating its eight-fingered hand. His aides whispered to one another, lowly, uncomfortable in such formalised society. Their segment of the table was perhaps the most stunning of all: a single block of juntaa-stone, inscribed with an astonishing filigree of flowing patterns and mandalas.

And directly opposite Tyra, seated comfortably and chatting affably with her equally at ease assistants, was Porel Tau Yisten, the vessels foremost water caste diplomat. Her group wore simple but colourful robes that turned their corner of the room into a riot of shades and hues. Elegant jewellery adorned their necks and wrists and domed pol hats were arranged at jaunty angles atop their braided locks of hair. As if in direct contrast to their gaudy appearance, their section of the table was a simple block of silver dusted jkaara, perfect mirrors on every surface. Tyra thought it most appropriate: the Por were renowned for their ability to adapt to any situation, reflecting and imitating those around them.

The Aunel, of course, was central.

Alone in the barren space between the arc segments of the table, lit from above by a single light drone, Aunel Tau Kovash devoured the attention of every individual and returned it in kind: a glowing beacon of certainty and assurance that calmed every nerve and soothed every impatience. He took small steps as he talked, turning from group to group, showing as much consideration to one caste as any other. His staff of office, a delicately ornamented honour blade set upon a tall cane of fiotak, tapped out a rhythm as he moved, giving his words a metered, songlike rituality.

would certainly seem their attempts to slow our progress have failed, he was saying, Path be praised. Nonetheless, let us not celebrate nor shield ourselves from the enormity of what the guela have undertaken this rotaa. The Aun swivelled in his spot, ancient gaze settling upon the rigid fire caste quarter of the room. Shaso, if you would begin?

OUdas nodded brusquely, rising to his feet and clearing his throat.

Honoured taufann, he began, using the age-old address for members of alternate castes, and half-bowing. This episode has cost us dearly.

We estimate thirty per cent losses amongst the line troops. Theres a full cadre at least, maybe two, still tied up on the planet. The further we move from orbit, the harder it becomes to retrieve them.

The Aun nodded thoughtfully.

Still, the general went on, rubbing his calloused knuckles. Weve brought the boarding crisis under control and the power core is secure. A near thing, by all accounts, but were stronger for it.

Ive compiled a status paradigm with the assistance of the AI, taking into account the strength and deployment of our resources. With your permission, taufann, I should like to propose a retaliatory strike within the d

Porel Yisten scoffed loudly, rolling her eyes. Tyra, watching her exaggerated performance with interest, reminded himself of the flamboyant reputation of the water caste, traditionally a point of enmity with the characteristically austere fire caste.

ELYisten? the ethereal purred, turning to face her. You wish to comment?

She slouched upright and tossed her hair braids over her shoulder. Tyra had to admit that her beauty legendary throughout the ship was enough to drive any male to consider breaking caste. He quashed the thought with an embarrassed cough, wondering vaguely when his next summons from the Propagation Department would arrive. The Fioos back on Tau, preoccupied with optimum genetic compatibility, orchestrated inter-caste couplings without prejudice or emotion, but still Tyra found himself musing enviously upon which lucky porel male would discover his name beside that of ELYisten on the summons form. He snapped himself from the reverie with a guilty

wince as she began to speak.

Retaliation seems a little premature, taufann, she trilled, smiling warmly. Id never attempt, of course, to counsel the honoured shaso in his duty

Huh, OUdas grunted, a little too loud.

But the arithmetic seems comprehensive. The guela fleet is, how can I put this? Extensive. We are but a single damaged warship.

Then how, OUdas interjected, do you propose to dissuade them from chasing us all the way back to the spacedock at Rann? A pleasant chat over a cup of jhal nectar?

As it happens, ELYisten returned, we have been attempting to contact the guela vessels. Is it not said that no enemy is beyond the reason of the tauva?

The Aunel dipped his head in her direction, clearly gratified by her knowledge of the siot. There are some who might disagree, he said with a nod, but the guela are not fools. They are, perhaps, ignorant even shortsighted but we must strive to forgive them their faults. They are the product of their history, not of their choice. We must attempt not to hate them.

Tell me, Porel. Have your entreaties achieved any success?

Yisten appeared to deflate, all of her cocksure confidence deserting her in the face of the ethereals attention.

No, Aunel. Our hails are either ignored or returned with viral data streams. Nothing threatening to our systems, of course, but hardly a diplomatic victory. Im confident that if I can converse with ranking personnel rather than the machine constructs manning the comms I could make some headway.

Mm. The Aunel pursed his lips. Ifs and buts, Porel. Ifs and buts. He swivelled in his spot again, turning to the Fio caste.

ElBoran? he invited. Anything to report?

The engineer took a final glance at his data wafer and stood, obviously uncomfortable at the attention. His voice was a characteristic earth caste burr.

Yes he said, scratching at his chin. The damage to the power stack seems minimal, despite everything. Ive sent a crew down to find out what the guela were up to in there. Nothing major, we dont think.

Full speed? the Aunel asked, tilting his head.

Two decs. Maybe three. As for the ship Id say were probably structurally sound no more breaches provided we can dry dock in, oh, two rotaa, maximum?

Thank you, Fioel. The Auns honour blade tapped on the floor. He twisted to face Tyra.

Koro. Please.

Tyra unfolded himself from his seat and waved his first fingers in the customary air caste greeting. Taufann, he said, considering his words with

care. I must admit to being bewildered, by the guela strategy. Initially I was convinced of their intention to destroy us, perhaps out of some Montau sense of revenge for our liberation of the Aunels personage. Who amongst us could appreciate such things, but they are at least plausible. Then the boarding began.

My duty my place within the One Path, has never been to understand the ways of the alien. I leave such duties to my esteemed cousin. He nodded respectfully at Elyisten, who returned the gesture with a smile. But these guela To me it seemed clear they were intent upon capturing this vessel a worthy prize for any race, enlightened or otherwise.

But now it seems their attempts to slow us, to outwit us it seems they are outdone in these things. As the noble shaso opined, they came close, but we are stronger for it. They are defeated, then. We can evade their main weapons indefinitely and, provided we remain alert and mobile, their boarding assaults will consistently fail. The question, then, esteemed taufann, becomes this: Why do they persist in their pursuit?

Kovash stared at him for a long time, bottomless wisdom filling him with light and acceptance.

Your logic, Koro, he sang, is flawless.

The Aun stepped into the very centre of the circle and stared at each face in turn, the light never leaving his long, thin features and the decorous ihelti cap disguising the scar upon his brow.

It seems clear that the prize the guela pursue is not this vessel, nor the eradication of its crew. I rather suspect they want me.

That wont happen, Aunel, OUdas grunted, standing. I wont allow it.

Kovash almost smiled. Rash words, Shaso, are the enemy of the One Path. My presence among you is the cause of this pursuit. I think the time has come to put an end to it.

Figures at all sides of the table leaped to their feet, protesting. Tyra found himself amongst them, sickened by the idea of sacrificing the Aun.

Nothing so dramatic, Kovash said, waving the throng to silence with a half smile. I have no intention of surrendering myself, or of losing my faculties to sentimentality and seeking a martyrs death.

No, what we face, taufann, is a simple decision. We can run with our tail between our legs, like an anxious uit, all the way to Rann. Perhaps the guela will catch us, perhaps not. Perhaps it wont matter, either way. There are, to my knowledge, three Auns aboard the dry-dock station at this time more than enough to render my presence entirely superfluous. We would, I think, be leading these humans to a greater prize than that which they currently pursue.

Or He took a deep breath, ancient eyes narrowing. We make a stand.

Quiet murmurings erupted from all quarters of the room, delegates and

aides discussing the disclosure animatedly. Shaso Udas, Tyra couldn't help noticing, wore a small smile. He'd get his retaliation after all. Even Elyisten was nodding quietly.

Aunel, Tyra said, standing. Should I contact Rann? Perhaps they could spare us reinforcements?

Kovash stared at him, again drowning him in perfect peace and calmness.

The ethereal smiled. That won't be necessary, Koro, he trilled. I summoned the flotilla two decs ago.

The room fell into astonished silence. Every tau stared at the tall figure, wordlessly contemplating his revelation. Elyisten recovered first.

You? You had already decided, Aunel? she asked, confused.

I had.

Then why this? Why the Aunchiagor?

Kovash smiled, his long fingers forming a thoughtful cradle. He turned the warm expression upon each caste group in turn. Understand, tauvann. This course of action is in the best interests of the tauva.

The guela grow more opportunistic with every rotaa. In the past tauvyr alone there have been four sizeable breaches of the Dalyth Treaty and countless smaller operations and incursions into our space. Until now the council within the Auntauretha has been reluctant to antagonise the guela, broadly tolerating these infringements. The council places great importance upon good will. This episode, it would seem, has swung the balance.

I contacted Auno Tau Kathlan as soon as I was aboard the dropship that returned me from captivity.

The mere mention of the prime ethereal, a figure of almost mythical status, was enough to leave Tyra and the other delegates around the table fighting to restrain their shock. Kovash allowed the pause to hang in the air before continuing.

He is no longer prepared to allow these hostilities to go unanswered.

A demonstration must be made, the council has decided. Oh, let us pity them, these guela. Let us not hate them for their ways, nor seek their extinction as they might seek ours. But hate or not, let them underestimate us no longer.

Shaso Udas led a chorus of consent, rapping his knuckles appreciatively against the tabletop. The other castes joined in with varying degrees of accord. The ethereal bowed gratefully to each corner of the room, turning finally to Porel Yisten.

To answer your question, honoured cousin, I had no great need to conduct the Aunchiagor, it is true. My decision was made and I might have ordered you, in the name of the One Path, to conduct your duty as I commanded. Is that not so?

It is, Aunel.

And yet I know, Porel, as do you, that a being is far more content in the execution of its duties when it has unravelled the need for them, than when forced to comply. We each are called to serve the tauva without question, but let us be under no illusion: the need to understand ones niche is often powerful indeed. The Aunchiagor is a great tool in removing the reliance upon unthinking obedience. To become dependant upon such a thing would make us little better than the guela, with their stark Emperor and their blinkered, narrow little minds. He leaned in close to the Por group, infinite eyes drinking them in. Tell me, ElYisten. Will you support me in this burden I carry, now that you see its necessity? Will you aid me in this unhappy duty?

She looked directly into the ethereals eyes and Tyra, watching from across the room, was again struck by her beauty subtly enhanced by her proximity to the Aun.

Without hesitation, she replied.

The portal latch chimed, shattering the expectant atmosphere. Tyra watched the door melt open silently, recognising the entrant as the middle-aged shasel who had accompanied Kovash to the bridge earlier. He looked tired.

The Aun tilted his head. ElLusha?

Apologies, Aunel. And, ah, honoured taufann. Theres something wrong. The guela are scanning us, somehow. Some sort of transmission, fixing on the bridge. The AI doesnt recognise it.

Fioel Boran stood, frowning. Is it a tightbeam signal?

I wouldnt know, Fioel. Is security an issue?

The engineer nodded, brows furrowed in thought. I should think it is, yes. We picked up a peculiar sort of signal just before the assault on the power core. Some sort of matter transmitter, I suspect. Fascinating.

OUdas addressed the room patiently, ignoring the fioels enthusiasm. Im invoking Martial Command, just for now. With your permission, Koro?

Tyra nodded helplessly, feeling events slipping beyond his grasp.

The general continued with gusto. All ranking personnel to evacuate the bridge.

The shasel hurried to escort the ethereal from the room, already a hive of activity. Tyra sat in silence how could they expect him to desert his bridge? The very idea was ludicrous.

His troubled thoughts were shattered by Udas, calling after ElLusha. Shasel? the general barked. Whats the infantry situation?

Not good, OUdas. Were diverting all units to the central promenade the guela are making a last stand.

Can you spare any to guard the bridge?

I wouldn't like to. We're not out of trouble yet.

Very well. The general fidgeted with the single braid of hair hanging over his shoulder, deep in thought. He fixed ElLusha with an inquisitive, if troubled, gaze. Tell me Where is LaKais?

They were a magnificent sight, Ensign Kilson thought (with, he admitted, a healthy twinge of fear). Clambering aboard the grid plate at the centre of the tech shrine, easing their way between resonating coils of copper viscera they were enough to leave him staring dumbstruck, mouth hanging open.

Their enormity was, in itself, daunting. Half as tall again as an average man, they hulked above all the personnel around them, grey-green armour plates glinting dully in the light. More striking even than their appearance was their reputation: warriors such as these saturated the legends of the Imperium with tales of glory and honour and valour. They were avatars of humanity's magnificence, living weapons designed solely to serve the Emperor's guiding light.

Kilson had never imagined in his wildest dreams being so close to a Space Marine that he could almost touch its articulating armour segments, feeling the vibrations of its colossal strides running through the deck beneath his feet. To see even one of the legendary figures in an entire lifetime was considered extraordinary. To escort a full squad, across four decks and two vertices of a battlecruiser, no less it was beyond incredible.

The chamber he'd led them to, a cavernous hangar with floating glow-globes and buttressed walls, was alive with the cloying emissions of two incense drones, circling one another in the shadows high above. A trio of tech-priests, sinister figures peering out beneath heavy cowls, chanted litanies from a pulpit nearby. Arranged with sprawling organic randomness at one end of the hangar, the strangest machine that Kilson had ever seen thrummed with barely restrained energy. Its looping coils and copper ducts reached a higher resonance and Kilson felt sure the air itself had begun to shiver.

He'd been astonished at how enthusiastically the squad—a brother-sergeant and five Marines of the Raptors Chapter—had volunteered for the mission. On the admiral's orders he'd visited the isolated section of the vessel where they were quartered, mind awash in excitement and trepidation. He'd not been allowed entry into the vaulted hallways and chapels of their habitation, of course (the very thought of desecrating those purified chambers was insane), but his stammered vox call across the internal comm had been answered almost immediately.

They'd come stamping along the deck like ancient giants, red eyeplates glowing, titanic frames easing forwards in a chorus of voices requesting information. With their helmets cradled uniformly in their left arms, Kilson

had taken the opportunity to compare the exteriors of the armoured giants with the all too human, almost frail-seeming faces peering from within. Not that their features betrayed any fragility, of course; their dark expressions put him in mind of starving men, reacting to the promise of food.

Hed done his best to satisfy their curiosity, though they spent much of the journey to the tech bay in vox-communication with the admiral, clarifying their mission. Hed caught a snatch of their rumbled conversation as he led them along the secured corridors of the ships core (hastily cleared of ratings scum by a small horde of armsmen). Theyd seemed eager for action.

At one point theyd passed through a crewspace where someone had daubed red graffiti across the tarnished bulkhead, an illiterate splatter of paint.

THEY iNSiDE AMUNG. ALL DiE!!

Ensign, one of the Marines had barked, gauntleted finger jabbing in his direction, then gesturing at the inscription. What is this?

J-just nonsense, my lord. Ratings gossip. Superstition, you understand. Explain.

He swallowed, throat dry. Theres talk of uh things, sir. Aboard the ship. What things?

Kilson shrugged helplessly, cheeks burning. The Marines exchanged glances, faces invisible behind glowering eyesockets.

Lead on, the sergeant growled.

And now, four decks and two vertices later, Kilson was forgotten by them a brief insect guide that had fulfilled its purpose and vanished. He lurked in the doorway of the tech bay and watched the priests fussing around the energy grid.

As they worked, the Space Marines replaced their helmets and linked arms, bodies swaying almost imperceptibly in time to some unknown purification prayer or litany. Kilson found himself wishing that theyd share its comforting verses with those beyond their circle of internal communication. Despite the awe and fear he felt, he was quickly finding an urge growing within himself to cherish every moment of their presence, as if somehow their unmistakable righteousness and purity might rub off, even on one so humble as him.

The locarus has a deployment solution, a priest hissed, studying a complex arrangement of brass-bound gauges. Omnissiah be praised.

Begin, another barked, his cassock marking out his seniority, tracing a complex shape in the air. A group of servitors began opening valve wheels, atrophied muscles bunching at the command of their unthinking logic engine minds.

The fixation target is acquired, the first priest intoned. All is ready. The trio of chanting acolytes raised their voices higher, sonorous mantras ringing

throughout the echoing cavern. The thrumming of the copper coils became almost unbearable, and Kilson clamped his hands over his ears in pain.

Now, the senior priest demanded, striking his censure against a plated duct in a flurry of incense. An inhuman howl consumed the chamber.

For Corax and the Emperor! the brother-sergeant roared through his helmet speakers, startling Kilson.

The incense danced, sparks drizzled from the air, the Marines clashed their weapons together with a roar and

And a perfect orb of light flickered into existence, flared more brightly than Kilson's eyes could stand, and vanished. The Space Marines were gone.

Something moved further ahead.

A piece of shadow detached from the smoothness of the duct, oscillating slowly into a new position. Kais tensed, raising the carbine. The tight confines of the crawl tube made the simplest movements a process of contortions and cramping muscles. The object shifted again. It flitted from shadow to shadow, hovering off the ground in the rounded cavity peaking the duct. It came to a halt and blinked a green light.

Kais relaxed.

Korvesa? he whispered. Identify and report.

The green light winked out.

Kais tried again. Drone? What's your status?

The shape clicked: a slow reptile rattle, building in volume. Two bright points of light, like eyes, fixated on Kais and flicked off and on.

Then the thing was rushing forwards, breaking from the cover of the shadows with the hiss of displaced air. Light fell across it like a blade and Kais saw it fully, gasping: This was no efficient tau drone, perfectly engineered gravitic stabilisers allowing unrestricted and silent manoeuvrability.

It was a guela head.

Disembodied and cadaverous, frail skin necrotic and sallow, pitted with maggotlike extrusions of circuitry and cabling. Its ancient lips, long since desiccated by age, were peeled back in a papery sneer to reveal the gap-toothed gums below, a network of bloodless flesh and exposed bone. From its abortive neck a thrumming anti-gravitic drive held it aloft. The ghoulish machine's jawbone ratcheted open with an audible crack, hanging monstrosly in a silent shriek. A gun barrel, hidden in the leering maw, briefly reflected an overhead light.

Kais blasted the ugly device into spinning fragments before it could fire, scattering the tight confines of the duct with scorched components and lumps of bone. A series of teeth rattled cheerfully on the dome of his helmet. He

shook his head and moved on, too exhausted to wonder where the monstrous attacker had come from.

The journey was proving tortuous. Hed been ready to rest following the incident in the engine bay. It had seemed *fair*. He felt like hed spent taucyrs his whole life, perhaps fighting and killing and running; the exhaustion had finally overwhelmed him and hed stood, swaying, as things returned to normal by degrees and his friends and comrades gathered around him. The ship was still full of guela, but theyd be hunted down. It had been as good as over, and the conflicting sides of his brain had gratefully segued into a single, relieved whole.

He should have guessed it wouldnt last.

So: first a garbled message from a fraught-sounding ElLusha, requesting his presence on the bridge. Not by the normal route, oh no, that was either blocked off or breached or infested, it didnt matter which. Instead he found himself worming along torkans of intestinal ducting and vent systems.

Second, the unpleasant business of guerrilla tunnel combat. The various conduit intersections and turbine chambers had yielded plentiful surprises in the form of guela troopers (mostly casualties or cowards whod crawled off to hide, he suspected). Hed lost the top segment of his shoulder torso guard when a gutshot trooper had taken a respectable stab at blowing his head off. Kais had returned the favour with rather more success.

Third, the internal workings of the *Ores Tashvar* normally a paragon of silent efficiency, out of sight and mind were not operating in his favour. Much of this part of the ship had been damaged by assault imparts, forcing him to travel further into the complex innards of the vessel than seemed sensible. His attempts to hail the bridge to shut down the blade fans and circulatory turbines had met with a stony silence, forcing him to divert several times into human-occupied chambers to power down systems. Control panels that would, no doubt, appear self-explanatory to any of the korla crewmen were, to him, little more than meaningless jumbles of switches and dials. Thus far hed prevailed by pressing everything at once.

And now, to cap it all, just as the intersection containing the command deck elevator was drawing near, he was getting attacked by scum-fire shyham-eating blood-of-tau skulls, of all things. He swore out loud, just for the sake of it, not caring about the breach of etiquette. He was ready to drop, and he didnt mind admitting it.

What kept him going was numbness. Hed reached a point beyond exhaustion. To stop now would cripple him, he suspected; the natural stimulants and pain were all that sustained him, pushing him on, delaying that moment when he could finally collapse and sleep and pretend to be normal again.

But there was something else. The remoteness of his physical fatigue was no protection against the turmoil in his mind, and for that he clung grimly to a single phrase:

Nobody ever pretended it would be easy

ElLusha had been right. To feel unfairly treated, to pity oneself somehow at the injustice of being responsible for such destruction: these were symbols of arrogance and Montau.

Kais had understood, as he crawled through the belly of the ship. Every fire warrior, he could see, must face their own Trial by Fire. For some it would be as simple as a physical test of their skills and abilities. For others for him such a test was redundant.

His proficiency for violence was inherent, no more open to adjudication than was the slant of his eyes or the size of his feet. For him, the true trial took place not at the tip of his gun barrel or in the bleeding piles of corpses he left behind him. For him, the trial took place in his mind.

So he kept going. He would accept the challenge and strive to succeed, to placate the devil inside him. He waged a tranquil, quiet war against the rage, using swords of focus and spears of calm, and in the name of the One Path he succeeded.

He reloaded the carbine, chewing his lip.

Thinking it was a lot easier than achieving it.

They'd killed everyone.

ElSiet, his second in command for six taucyrs. Ruptured parts scattered across the deck, tendrils of brainsludge slithering down his control console.

ElVerseva, his personnel officer. They'd taken time with her, blowing off her limbs one at a time until she just lay there, emptying across the deck, too traumatised to even scream.

ElGeiven and ElFay, the six korvres manning the comms and all the koruis and korlas that hadn't yet evacuated the bridge. Pulped. Shredded. Atomised and seared, knocked apart by hungry bolter shells or scorched into bubbling liquescence by all manner of vile, howling guela weapons.

Kofo Tyra forced open his swollen eyes and surveyed his domain, resisting the urge to vomit. There had been no fight, here. No honourable battle or measured struggle for supremacy. The attackers had stepped out of thin air without warning or challenge, opening fire with a savagery Tyra could never before have imagined. This was carnage, pure and simple. They'd turned his bridge into an abattoir, and expected what? Cooperation?

You will tell us, one said, its voice a metallic boom. Its face, occluded behind a dark green helm with glowing eyes, glowered down from high above.

Where is the ethereal? said another.

You will tell us, the first repeated, or you will die.

A segmented gauntlet backhanded him across his face, snapping his head around and dropping him to the floor. Pain blossomed along his cheekbone, and he dribbled blood onto the deck. It didnt matter.

Tell us, one said. He didnt know which. They all looked the same: hulking bodies destroying his sense of scale, their thrumming armour moving with speed and agility defying their enormity. A metal boot caught him in the ribs, flipping him onto his back. He felt the bones of his chest crackling as he landed.

The ethereal, one said. Where is he?

He forced his lips to part and hissed at the impossible shapes towering over him. Sssafe he managed.

The colossus at the edge of the group stamped forwards, armour decorated with whorls and runes that seemed clipped and ugly to Tyras eyes. He wore no helmet, frail guela features protruding bizarrely from the slabs of ceramite that covered his shoulders. A long pinion of blue metal arched over his bald skull, tangles of cables infesting the ridge of his brow. His eyes seemed to glow.

You will tell me, xenogen, it said, mournful voice reaching into Tyras mind and sweeping a wave of nausea and dizziness across him. You have no choice in this.

I think not, Tyra croaked, voice heavy with a confidence he didnt feel.

Xenogen. I am Lexicanium Librarian Macex of his Imperial Majestys Raptors. Understand this: you are going to die. Today. By my hand. Tell me where your ethereal is hiding and Ill make it quick, on my honour. I have no greater kindness to offer you, alien.

Tyra almost laughed, coughing on the blood in his throat. I hh Im not *afraid* of you, guela.

The humans features creased, its expression almost sad. It extended one gauntleted hand, fingers spread, pressing down with surprising tenderness against his brow. More the fool you, it said, eyes crackling with a strange energy.

Daggers hit the inside of Tyras mind. A splintering medley of pain, indescribable agony that violated every part of his brain, surged through his head, making him cry out in astonishment. Tendrils of fire, like superheated proboscises, examined his thoughts in a series of clumsy incisions.

Like a bubble rising to the surface of a pool of sludge, he could feel the knowledge of the ethereals whereabouts distending and blooming upwards, thirsting for light, coiling inexorably towards the burning pseudopodia that invaded his brain. Sensing the nearness of his prize, the librarians psychic

assault strengthened, charring the very skin of Tyra's face where his hand made contact.

The koro was still screaming and flailing when the unhelmeted warrior's pink features exploded in a gust of blood and brains. Tyra sagged gratefully to the floor, smoke coiling from his eyes and ears.

The other colossi reacted immediately, raising weapons to cover all points of the room, frantic gestures seeming ridiculous without the spoken commands to accompany them. Tyra wondered abstractly, hazy with pain and fear, what they were saying to each other in the insulated sanctity of their helmets. He hoped they were scared.

In an instant the room became a maelstrom of dizzying weaponsfire and detonating shells. Weak from his injuries, bewildered and stunned by the chaos of the combat around him, Koro Natash Tyra barely even noticed when one of the Marines carefully stamped on his skull and crushed his brain.

The first one was a gift. He fragmented its ugly, exposed head from his concealment in the space beside the elevator. He ducked back into the recess and waited for the resulting whirlwind of directionless, panicky return fire to abate.

Curled foetally in his concealment, Kais's ears became his eyes. There was a heavy *clang* the dead Space Marine's body toppling to the deck. Its power output thrummed noisily before hissing away into silence. Kais seized upon the distraction to ease onto his feet, melting into the shadows cast by consoles nearer the centre of the bridge. He stole a single glance at the group, arranged on overwatch as one bent over the body of their dead comrade. He seemed to be pushing some sort of instrumentation into the ragged wound of the corpse's neck, oozing blood and filth across the deck.

Heavy footsteps clanked nearby, the Marines spreading out to find their prey. Their silence was somehow horrifying, reacting to commands only they could hear, more like machines than organisms. Kais found himself again pondering upon the nature of the tauva, and whether the cost of efficacy was a lifetime of mechanical hollowness. He eased himself into a crouch and flicked a button-sized signal-flare quietly across the room, not allowing himself the time to worry about what he was planning next. The flare clattered quietly behind the communications consoles and ignited with a fizz.

The firestorm rumbled to life again, gunfire shredding the consoles like a hungry zephyr, an invisible airborne claw raking spitefully at the fiotak surfaces. Kais didn't wait, pouncing from his concealment whilst the Marines were distracted and sprinting forwards, assessing as he moved.

Time slowed to a crawl.

There were two to his left, pumping long streamers of bolter fire into the

tangled morass of metal where the consoles had once stood. A nebulous orb of plasma distorted across his vision from the right, adding to the wreckage around the flare, now venting purple smoke. Kais rolled as he moved, snatching a glance to his side where two other Marines hulked, plasma-weapons raised.

The final guela stood at the apex of the bridge, facing directly towards him.

Watching him. Unfooled by the distraction. Raising its weapon.

Death to the unclean! it roared, voice thick with metallic transmission.

The bolter opened fire and Kais pounced away, tumbling clumsily sideways. Miniature explosions rattled all around him and he scrabbled forwards, racking the carbines underslung secondary parts as he went. He had time to squeeze the trigger just once before stumbling aside as the column of detonating shells raked past him.

The guela saw a spinning object flipping through the air and caught it instinctively, bringing its gauntleted fist up to its face in confused examination. The grenade blew the top half of its armoured body into fragments of gore and ceramite, transforming the bridge into a bone-pocked atrocity and leaving the Marines disembodied legs, like the remains of a vandalised statue, planted stalwartly amongst the carnage. The other humans swivelled towards him instantly, colossal silhouettes hazing through the violet mist like ghosts, eye slits blazing eerily.

He became an animal, sprinting for its life. He was a clonebeast being hunted, a ceremonial preything being stalked by the shasuis during the festival of Taukonseh. Weapons opened up on either side, invisible trceries whistling past his head, narrowing-in implacably. And all within moments that lasted forever, a single raikan stretching on glacially for taucrys.

He danced through the purple flaresmoke, lurching and rolling and fainting, wondering abstractly which of the four guela arranged almost formally to either side would be the first to find their mark. A plasma orb shrieked past within torils, singeing the fabric of his regs at his elbow.

What does the clonebeast do? he asked himself.

It runs. Even when exhausted, foaming and coughing, breaths laboured and bloody. Always away, running from the jethri spears of its pursuers.

And they always catch it, sooner or later

So what does the clonebeast never do?

He adjusted his angle and, not slowing, sprinted directly at the two Marines on his right. A bolter shell, fired from behind, ripped through the outer layers of his thigh armour and shredded a clod of weave fabric, detonating angrily as it spun away. He kept going, finding time somehow within the adrenaline chaos and insanity of his mind to enjoy the bewildered

posture of the Space Marines before him, bending away in astonishment as their easy kill bounded towards them. The bolter fire at his back didn't stop.

He dived between the legs of the nearest colossus, rolling madly and leaping, cat-like, for the cover of a recess. The two Space Marines across the room, bolters chattering hungrily as they tracked after him, were too late to realise their mistake. The threads of impact fire chased him across the deck until he was shielded by the bodies of their comrades, purple haze wafting around their huge forms. Caught in the crossfire, bolter shells stabbed ugly holes through their armour before they could even protest, leaving ribbon trails of blood hanging in the air. The shells that had lodged inside them detonated one after another, sending the guela in an absurd jerking jig as they slumped to the floor, innards pulped, plasma weapons clattering to the deck.

Their comrades ceased fire, rushing forwards through the mist as they saw what they'd done. Kais wished he could hear their vox-exchange, relishing the anger and guilt they must be feeling. Their advance was a riot of clanging footsteps and racking weapons, smashing their way through the shredded remains of consoles and benches. One hulked away towards the side wall of the bridge, moving around to cut Kais off. The other edged forwards, bolter barrel sweeping from left to right hungrily, seeking out its prey.

Kais quit his cover in a flash, muscles bunching. He was past the Marine and sprinting before the colossus could even react. He imagined the figure behind him, gyrating around with that strange mechanical fluidity, weapon raised, to track his movements. This time he would be too close to miss.

Kais's hand closed over the dropped plasma gun he'd been leaping for, slick with blood from its owner's mangled body. He turned and fired in a single, leg-jarring movement, crying out in desperation.

A bolter shell tore into his helmet.

The impact flipped him backwards like a piece of paper, scattering the pixellated view of his HUD. Before the dark clouds of unconsciousness swarmed into his eyes and mind he heard, far away, the satisfying impact of a plasma orb and the dying screams of a guela.

The shadows came down. Kais just had time to wonder, dully, how long there was between impact and detonation of a bolter shell before everything went black.

Her team was exhausted. They'd fought off three boarding parties back to back, wading through the bodies of their enemies to take ground and corner the guela invaders. They'd watched friends and comrades falling and dying pulverised by the chattering hellguns of the humans or sucked silently into the void behind sealing blast doors, screaming the last of their air away into nothingness.

Theyd reinforced the engine bay where the last of the guela were converging executing every last one without compassion or mercy or hate. It was a cull, cold and pure and simple.

Then theyd rushed to the bridge, picking off the few wounded stragglers that remained among the crippled corridors of the *Ores Tashvar*, until at long last, after what seemed like rotaas of running and fighting theyd found a working elevator to the command deck.

Shasla Tau Ju, reciting the *siot* meditation of focused aggression beneath her breath, stumbled onto the bridge in a knot of other shaslas and faced a nightmarish vision.

Purple haze, thin enough to give everything an insipid, violet taint, hung listlessly in the air. Wrecked controls and shattered technology blinked and sparked spastically, splattered by the mingled blood of tau and guela alike. Koro Natash Tyra, unmistakable in his robesuit, lay in a heap in the centre of the bridge, smashed skull leaking fluids.

Then she saw the Marine. There were others, dead and shattered, lying in enormous mounds at different points of the bridge, but this one was alive: an articulating monstrosity straight from the didactic courses that had given her nightmares as a youth. It stood in plain sight, leaning over the body of a fire warrior and raising its blocky weapon.

Ju didnt think. She lifted her carbine and shot the gargantuan warrior over and over again, and didnt stop when the rest of the team joined her. The figure seemed to glow briefly at the combined assault, then, with an aborted roar of pain and frustration, exploded. The mess on the bridge got worse.

The fallen shasla, she found, was Kais. Hed been shot in the head.

When he awoke he laughed like a yearling shassaal at the sight of her, and they were still hugging and smiling and examining the almost fatal dent in his helmet, a miraculously unexploded shell still buried in the fiotak, when Shaso Udas, concealed with the other dignitaries in some well-guarded part of the vessel, spoke across the ships communicator.

The fightback had begun.

IV

11.26 HRS (SYS. LOCAL ~ DOLUMAR IV, Ultima Seg. #4356/E)

The tau flotilla erupted from the final tentative warp hop in the midst of a blue-green corona, dissipating energies blossoming and fading into the void. Some forty vessels, none remotely as large as their guela counterparts but awe-inspiring in their sleek manoeuvrability and sheer weight of numbers, slipped into reality on the edges of the Dolumar system and surged towards the guela fleet, still in dogged pursuit of the *Ores Tashvar*. Their rounded prows reflected the muggy light of the systems star, casting luminous lines across the bulbous outer hulls of their fellows.

Lushas breath caught in his throat at the sight. The various els and os around him resisted the instinct to hiss in astonishment, wide eyes tracking the warships as they slunk past, disgorging swarms of fighters.

By the path Fioel Boran croaked, unable to conceal his amazement.

In no time the flotilla was lost beyond the view from the gallery window and the dignitaries turned to the korvre at the chambers sole monitoring console. The secondary bridge was little more than an armoured bunker near the lowermost segments of the *Ores Tashvar*, but thus far it had proved impregnable. Soon, Lusha suspected, Kovash and the others would return to the real bridge now secured, if reports were to be believed.

The korvre studied the complex series of icons and projection vertices lacing the screen. The flotillas slowing to engagement speed, he murmured. The guela are scattering. Trying to get round without engaging.

Kovash nodded sourly. They have no stomach for battle. They just want their prize.

Aunel were being hailed by the *Telham Kenvaal*. Patching it through

The console chimed as a channel opened.

Ores Tashvar? This is Koro Dalyth Menhe. Whats your status?

Kovash gestured for a transmitter drone. OMenhe. Your arrival is most welcome. This is Aunel Tau Kovash.

Aunel! Thank the path! We feared the worst.

I live yet, Koro. Weve held them at bay so far.

What action, Aunel? The guela are attempting to evade.

Kovash twisted briefly towards Shaso Udas, who stood staring at the sensor chart with a calculating frown. Shaso?

Lusha watched the general carefully, wondering what discipline hed

consider the most appropriate. He scratched at his chin.

Kenrai, he decided. Cut off the head, the body will die.

Kovash nodded, pursing his lips, and turned back to the drone. Harry the fleet, Koro. Well target the flagship ourselves.

OMenhes reply took a long time. Lusha imagined him aboard the *Telham Kenvaal*, gaping at the brazenness of OUdass plans.

U-understood, Aunel. For the Greater Good. The console chimed again and the room descended into silence.

OUdas Do we have sufficient manpower for this?

I believe so, Aunel. The boarding shuttles are operational at least, so insertion shouldnt be an issue providing we can knock through the shields, that is.

Very well. The ethereal turned to the console with a deep breath. Sound the attack.

<Tightbeam (multi-direction) commstream generation (0/543.h).>

<Carrier-code [Oscillate:54.4>127.22]. Priority-1. (0/550.q) Datastream transmission only.>

<Logging receipt>

<All targets receiving. (0/553.d).>

<ALL FLEET CODE.>

<GENERAL HAIL. Suspend comm-traffic for durations.>

<Channels sustained.>

++Fleet, this is Admiral Constantine.++

++Do not, repeat, do not engage the enemy flotilla. Focus on the prize-ship. We must take the ethereal.++

[Admiral? Captain Brunt, *Purgatus*. Theyre moving to intercept. Evasions not an option any mo]

++Brunt youll do as youre told.++

[Hes right, admiral. Forsithe on the *Baleful Gaze*, here. Unless we engage now theyll eat us alive.]

[You see?]

++There will be no discussion! We pursue the target vessel, as planned!++

[Sir this is lunacy!]

++No, this is insubordination, Forsithe. Ill have your head!++

[Admiral? Captain Tigarus. Im afraid I concur with the others. We need to return fire.]

[Were outnumbered two-to-one. Either we fight or we flee. Theres no way around.]

++The first commander that breaks from the chase will be court-

martialled for flagrant sedition and executed!++

[Sir the chase may be a moot issue The prize-ships turning.]

++What?++

[By the throne are they mad?]

++This doesnt make sen++

[Theyre closing on the *Enduring Blade*, sir]

[You may want to evade]

++They cant hope to outgun us Theyre mad!++

[Theyre Oh, Vandires teeth Theyre launching shuttles.]

[Admiral! Theyre trying to board you!]

++They cant. The shields will h++

[Picking up plasma fire.]

[Living god! Look at that payload!]

[Terras bones!]

++Th upid cant ho n astards!++

[Throne]

++Theyve knocked out my shield! Assist! Assist!++

[Im engaged. Cant get away]

[Oh terra! Theyve g]

[Shuttles homing on you, admiral.]

[ammit, the generariums brea]

[...]

[Brace-brace-brace!]

[The *Reverus* has gone]

[Sweet Emperor Theyre so fast]

++Th This is++

++All vessels All vessels engage and destroy!++

++Forget the bloody ethereal!++

++In the Emperors name, make them bleed!++

They called it sehen che lel. Riding the lightning.

Kais had undergone training, taucyrs earlier in the battledome. He remembered the first time. Hed been heartily sick afterwards and was somewhat gratified to find his friends equally as green as was he.

The real thing was worse. Strapped into a one-tau pod like an insect moulded into a bullet, the shuttle tube was little more than a vast railgun: linear energies dragging the pod along a frictionless tunnel with a succession of sonic booms. The view through the small window above his face stopped making any sense as the pods velocity increased exponentially and the rounded struts of the tunnel became a single tawny-coloured smear. A

vibration grew from nothingness into a dreadful quake, threatening to splinter his armour and turn his body to powder. He gritted his teeth and resisted the urge to cry out. Then the roar ceased, the blur of the tunnel was wiped away in a daub of star speckled blackness and he was streaking across the void.

Theyd tried to stop him. First Ju, then the others in her team, then Lusha over the comm. Hed earned his rest, theyd said. There were more than enough shaslas for the assault. Hed done his duty. He was a hero. Let it be.

Then theyd grown angry, despairing of his obstinate refusal to rest. Hed been shot in the head, by the One Path. Even by the pragmatic unsuperstitious standards of taukind he was pushing his luck. Hadnt he done enough?

No.

No, he had not. The trial wasnt over. He felt it in his bones.

He must face the Montau devil again and again and again until he killed it or it became him. Then, he supposed, if he hadnt died first, the trial would be over. So they rearmed and resulted, filled their packs with as much wargear as they could carry, distributed miniature korvesa slave drones, strapped each other into hypervelocity capsules and were unceremoniously blasted at the beaked vulture-shape that was the *Enduring Blade*.

Hed refused to take a new helmet, though he couldnt exactly explain why.

The dud bolter-shell might detonate at any moment, he supposed, failed guela artifices fizzling to life and blasting his head from his shoulders. And, just as easily, he might detonate at any moment, the devil on his back reaching into his heart and snapping the frail chord leading to the tauva. Parallels and echoes.

It was sentimentality of the very worst kind, and Ju had looked at him like he was insane when he refused the pristine replacement she offered him. It didnt matter. This was his Trial by Fire and hed deal with it in his way.

Alone in the capsule the silence was thick, like being suffocated in velvet. Peering through the maddeningly tiny viewport, Kais was barely aware of moving at all, let alone hurtling at dizzying speed. He wondered vaguely how many other shaslas streaked ahead and behind him, each one immersed in his or her own silent world of introspection and fear.

ElLushas voice startled him, echoing across a multi-band channel.

Shaslas? Weve overloaded their void shields but they wont stay down for long. Shuttle trackers have a lock on their juntas-side launch bays, so thats your insertion point. Your first priority after splashdown is to knock out the hangar weapons and disrupt their shield generators in the long-term. After that, strategic boarding strategies apply Cripple the engines, capture the bridge, disable the weapons.

The Aunel offers his fondest regards and wishes you well in your endeavours. Tauva be with you, line warriors.

Before the comm-channel closed, Kais heard the quiet whistle of the bandwidth narrowing. And LaKais? Remember the machine.

With that the comm died and the silence unfolded its wings around him. A bright row of characters at his side dimmed gradually, representing his approach to the target in a chorus of quiet chimes and light levels.

Thirty raikans, the capsules AI trilled. Kais swallowed.

Abruptly his view through the port window changed: the blackness of space was replaced by a ghastly facade of buttresses and spines, vast crenellated towers and spindly steeples, looming towards him. Perspective was impossible to judge; just as it seemed inevitable that he'd smash across the intricate cliff face his senses realigned to accommodate its despicable vastness. Every moment of diminishing proximity was a moment where its enormity became more and more apparent.

The capsule shuddered, AI chiming in alarm and thrusters struggling to realign. Angry light bloomed in the viewportal, little more than a flicker that was gone in a moment. It happened again and he frowned, confused. Above, high on the architectural mountain, bright pinpricks of las-fire and shrapnel flak stabbed from the vessels vaulted, pitted hull, detonating spectacularly around the ghostly arrowheads of tau fighters that soared past, burst cannons dissecting great blocks of obsidian armour. Another petal of fire oozed past him, close, and he realised with a quickening heartbeat that the guela were firing at the hail of capsules as well as the fighters.

He'd imagined this, taucyrs ago, after the simulations. He'd imagined rumbling artillery, a constant drone of blossoming explosions and the shuddering chaos of running the firebelt gauntlet, watching helplessly as his comrades were plucked from the air like irritating insects, wondering whether he'd be one of the lucky ones.

He hadn't imagined the silence, the stillness. At any moment he could fly apart in a suffocating ball of shrapnel and fiery laser heat singeing and freezing and detonating all at once and he'd never see it coming. Until then he was a rodent, sealed in a speiy-bottle and cast adrift at sea, never knowing if it would reach the shore or perish, always expecting but never anticipating the jaws of a tpel shark around it.

Drift with the current. Be not concerned with that which you cannot control.

A snippet from the Dhavre meditation. He'd never remembered the rest.

Ten raikans.

He took a final, heartstopping glimpse through the viewportal as the launch bay swallowed him, a gun-metal blur of tunnel lights and shadows. The capsule chimed, volume growing.

Brace, it chirped, the artificial voice sounding bored.

It shuddered heavily, passing through the field generator separating the atmosphere-rich interior of the hangars from the hard vacuum beyond. There was silence for a brief moment before the capsule hit the deck with a galaxy-splitting *crump*. It bounced and skidded.

There was noise and pain. There was tumbling and spinning and splintering. There was nonsensical, blurring insanity through the viewportal.

And finally, after an eternity of madness, there was stillness.

Librarian Delpheuss prediction had been correct, it would seem.

Ardias armed his bolt pistol with a cold rasp and stamped into the briefing hall. A servitors mechanised drone piped again and again across the vessels internal vox.

All hands to repel boarders. All hands to repel boarders. All hands to repel boarders. All hands to

Ardias punched the speaker and resisted the urge to grin savagely as fragments of plasteel tumbled past him. Even in wanton destruction there must be discipline.

Aal nds to re borrrrrrr zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzkk.

I heard the first time. he grunted.

The assembly of company sergeants and veterans chuckled under their breaths, arranged in a perfect line. He turned to face them, gratified that their mirth instantly hardened to resolve.

Brothers Do you stand ready for battle?

Aye! they chorused, clashing weapons against breast plates in perfect unison, faces glowing with martial pride.

The company?

Veteran-Sergeant Mallich took a clipped half step forwards. It stands ready, brother-captain. Chaplain Mulvarius is intoning battle rites as we speak.

Good. It had been a hundred years since his elevation beyond the rank of sergeant, but Ardias slid back into the posturing, parade-ground-inspection routine with ease. He kneaded his knuckles thoughtfully. Brothers In consulting with Admiral Constantine I have made a troubling discovery. We are not alone in our secondment aboard this vessel. A few brows dipped, confused. A full company of Space Marines of the Raptors Chapter, it would seem, shares our assignment. He sighed, annoyance palpable to the listeners. I neither understand nor care why we were kept ignorant of this, but questions will be asked of the Navis Nobilite, you may count upon it. One does not attract the Ultramarines with claims of goodwill, then insult them by bolstering their strength with lesser warriors. I know little of the Raptors, brothers, but their reckless disregard for the Codex is legendary.

The veterans shook their heads angrily, muttering beneath their breaths. The Codex Astartes composed by their Chapters primarch Roboute Guilliman detailed the correct conduct and attitude of a Space Marine in any given circumstance. To Ardias and his kin it was more than a behavioural manual; it was sacred.

They have been petitioned by the admiral to guard strategic points of the vessel. Engines, generarium, command deck and so on.

The veterans discontent grew, flashing angry glances at one another, clearly insulted. Captain? Why them?

A pertinent question, Sergeant Mallich and one to which I have no answer. The Raptors were clearly forewarned of whatever trouble these navy fools have landed themselves in. They requested and were granted operative duties, before I was even made aware of the situation.

Theyre unreliable, brother-captain!

I share your ire, brother, but we must be calm in the face of this insult. We must demonstrate that one does not garrison a company of Ultramarines then ignore them, Emperors tears!

The veterans chant pounded at the air. Aye!

Ardias narrowed his eyes, voice suddenly cold. When the Raptors make mistakes and they will, brothers, have no doubt we must be there to lead the way. We must show the children of the Imperium that a single Ultramarine, with his mind and heart filled with the words of blessed Guilliman, is worth any twenty firebrand Raptors.

The storm of assent was deafening, the officers roaring and calling out prayers in the Emperors name, ringing their fists against their armour. Ardias basked in it, letting it wash over him.

I want squads positioned at strategic points throughout this ship. Stay in contact and avoid confrontation with the Raptors. If you find yourself challenged, refer them to my vox. True warriors of Macragge brook no interference from loose cannons with no respect for the Codex! Is that clear?

Aye!

Thats all, brothers. Courage and honour! Move ou

Wait!

Ardias turned to the doorway with a frown. He disliked interruptions.

Librarian Delpheus staggered into the briefing room clumsily, supporting himself against the wall. His face was pale and wan, sweat collecting on his cable-pocked brow. The psychic hood glowed dully, like a faltering illuminator. Ardias's ire turned immediately to concern and he rushed forwards to support his comrade.

Delpheus? Brother, whats wrong?

Another vision The librarian was gagging on his words, eyes rolling.

Ardias had never seen him like this. M-more signs. More pictures. The masked fiend, revealing itself He was sweating, suits thermal regulators struggling to equalise his temperature.

Brother I dont understand. Youre not making sense.

The masked fiend. The masked fiend. The masked fiend

Ardias glanced at the sergeants, watching the display with a mixture of fascination and revulsion. Delpheuss goggle-eyed loss of dignity was far removed from the Ultramarine way of life, and suspicion towards mutants even those of incalculable value to the Chapter was deeply ingrained in the creeds of the Codex.

Delpheus, Ardias hissed, uncomfortable. You must control yourself.

The Librarians oscillating eyeballs fixed on him, clarity returning with a jolt.

Its. The ship, yes. Theres something aboard

We know that, brother. Throne-damned xenogens! We must purge th

No! No something more! S-something *else*

What?

Sergeant Mallich, a look of profound distaste creasing his features, lost his patience. Captain? We should fall out, yes?

No! Delpheus cried, finally dragging himself upright unaided. His eyes, ringed and sunken, prowled from face to face. He settled his gaze on Ardias and nodded, some semblance of reason returning to his features.

Brother-captain You must allow the Raptors their commission.

But

There will be need for us afterwards. There are worse than tau aboard Ive seen it. Ive seen it, dont you hear me? I have seen it!

Seen what, by the Emperor? Talk sense!

Delpheus leaned in close to Ardiass face, feverish lips trembling. His voice was almost inaudible, psychic hood turning the air greasy.

Old friend, he hissed, if youve ever trusted me If ever youve believed my words, hear me now. A darkness approaches. There is The Ultramarines, throne bless their thousand souls Theyll be needed. Let the Raptors fight these tau, if they must. Win or lose it doesnt matter. We must be ready for the aftermath. We must steel ourselves for the masked fiend

Ardias stared deep into his old friends eyes and saw, as ever, the aching pain of the psychic curse, a lonely voice of sanity crying out from beyond a boundary of warp-spawned madness. But there was an inviolable core of certainty there as well. He took another glance at the sergeants. They werent remotely convinced.

What would you have me do? he asked his shivering comrade.

Just be ready they come. They *come*

The librarian sunk to his knees, eyes rolling into his head. He collapsed to the deck with a groan and lay there unconscious, breathing heavily.

Sergeant Corlum broke the expectant silence. Sir?

Ardias didnt take his eyes off the Librarian, gritting his teeth. Cancel all previous orders. he said. Have the men standing by.

But sir! You cant believ

No arguments, brother. I want the men ready. Weapons loaded and armed. Distribute ammunition evenly. It seems we must wait for action.

Sir.

Fall out.

The sergeants stamped out, shaking their heads and muttering. Ardias regretted their discontent, but could hardly blame them. He stared at the librarian, feverish breaths slowly normalising, and wondered what hed meant.

They come they come

The other shaslas were in awe of him, he realised. Oh, they tried to conceal it, keeping pace with him, twittering professionally, taking turns to cover the rear or to take point. Hed decided to let them try and keep up, if they must. They were judging themselves along parameters for which he had no use.

Number of kills. Courage under fire. Objectives overcome. Real things; physical, violent things. For them these were the heart of their struggles and challenges, their Trials by Fire. He envied them the simplicity of their test.

Twice now since boarding this vaulted sepulchre-in-space hed been forced to slam shut his eyes and drag the rage into a confined ball of focus, reciting his fathers meditation over and over and over.

The hangar had been a killing ground, a debris-strewn abattoir streaked through by crash landing capsules, mangled guela attack craft and artillery fire, digging gouges from the deck and dousing everything in burning fuel, air-skimming debris and blood. Hed lost control, briefly. Hed sprung from his burning shuttle with an adrenaline surge, spraying the panicky guela with carbine fire. Hed watched a boarding capsule plough into their pintle guns like a vengeful meteor, pulping their frail bodies and detonating in a whirlwind of overheating munitions. The other tau, converging on the masked plinth where hed established his slaying point, had cried out in horror at the carnage. Hed *smiled*.

It happened again whilst disabling the guns on the deck below. It was as though a haze came down, like nothing was real and everything was distant. It felt like being numb: his inadequacies filled the world, a shadow gallery of frustrated instructors, mocking cadre mates and, above it all, his fathers disappointed eyes, seeing nothing but uselessness in his own son. In every moment of every heartbeat Kais knew Hed never be so great, so respected, so

focused as his father had expected him to be. He was flawed and it hurt.

And the only thing that could cut through the pain, that could remind him of being alive, that could convince him he was something other than a drone within a hive, was the screaming and the fire and the gurgling and the violence. It broke through the shell and it was addictive.

So he endured it, little by little, until he could see through the rage and think through the adrenaline. Every time it came upon him it became a little harder to claw his way back to the surface, back to rationality.

They'd disabled the weapons, they'd crippled the shield, they'd regrouped and congratulated one another like shassaals after their first rotaa of training.

Kais had stood apart, new armour already tarnished with soot and blood, and thought: *children*.

Then the orders had come through, Lushas voice sounding broken and distorted by whatever dampening shields the guela ship employed, and Kais's team was away, heading for the engine rooms in a gaggle of stringently by-the-book squad deployments. Kais rolled his eyes and kept quiet, guiltily waiting for the killing to begin again.

The *Enduring Blade* was unlike anything he could have prepared himself for. So radically alien to the gentle camber of all tau construction, this was a labyrinth of clipped corners, square-hewn buttresses and vast archways. Side arteries branched away unexpectedly, cloistered passages of conduit-striated shadows and undulating serpents of ducts and cables. A creeping tide of rust smeared itself across the gunmetal walls, water dribbling incontinently from fractured pipes and panels.

Narrow tunnels opened into breath-catching galleries, where backlit icons marking the walls illuminated capering dust motes high above, and chittering rodent vermin scurried in the gloom. In these vaulted chambers the faux-machismo of the team would stutter out and they'd slink silently as if cowed by the sheer enormity of the place. Kais appreciated the moments of quiet; as soon as the tunnel was rejoined the silence was inevitably shattered.

Corner check, two by two.

Checking the blacksun-fil. Hold Zone clear. Moving on.

Scan track? Scan track?

High-level yequali radiation. Probable enemy presence.

And so on. It was boring, thought Kais, and on both occasions where frightened knots of guela troopers had appeared, all the shaslas military bravado had served them not a jot. Within instants of the helmet scanners detecting movement the team split, a textbook left-right division. Those to the rear could provide cover in case of a fallback and the line warriors nearest the targets could lay down pinning fire. Thus covered, the secondary and tertiary pairs carrying rifles could take a more accurate bead on the enemy. Standard,

routine: proven to work.

Kais had no patience for it. He shredded the first wave of guela with a grenade even as they rounded the corner ahead, then pumped carbine fire into the heads of the others as they staggered, shellshocked and gore-splattered, from the smoke. They went down in a tangle, pulped skulls shredding like overripe griyna fruits, limbs twitching and clawing at the air.

The other shaslas never fired a single shot.

So, yes, they were in awe of him. They exchanged whispered conversations whilst glancing in his direction, tried to keep pace as he silently haunted the shadows and prattled uselessly to make themselves feel professional. It was pathetic.

Amongst the strangers of his team Kais recognised three of the warriors: fellow first-timers whod trained and graduated with him in the battledome on Tau. Theyd preened and performed flawlessly back then, impressing instructors and drill-shasvres with their coolheadedness and their unblinking faith in the tauva. Back then, hed been in awe of them.

He caught one of them staring and grinned to himself.

Further along the corridor, its distant apex hidden behind the mask of deep gloom, someone screamed. Kais thought it probably guela but wasnt sure; it was a shriek of terror and pain that transcended language and became a force, raising the ciretz scales along his spine and neck with a shiver. The other shaslas froze, ducking into corners instinctively. The scream shut off as abruptly as it had begun.

One of the shaslas, voice quavering, said What was?

Quiet. Kais waved the others out of their cover and cautiously moved along the corridor. The team exchanged glances and followed, fingers tight around gun triggers.

The walk seemed to last forever, the dim lighting achieving little other than hardening the resolution of the shadows. Everything was still and silent, like entering the gut of some long-dead behemoth. Dust rose spectrally from the floor with each step, tumbling in its slow dance before settling again. Each hoof-fall became a miniature gong blast that echoed briefly before being swallowed by the completeness of the silence.

The next scream was louder still, accompanied this time by a shuddering, clanging cacophony: something beating against metal. Kais felt his blood freeze and pushed himself against the wall, reassured by its solidity. One of the shaslas moaned quietly into the comm. The silence resumed, even thicker than before.

He activated his blacksun filters, nictitating lenses sliding across his helmet optics. Instantly the world was rendered lurid and kaleidoscopic, long corridor daubed in bright green hues. Rodents bristling patches of bright

yellow and white lurked in the shallow gullies to either side of the deck grille. But there was something else: at the top of the hall where the path turned sharply to the left, a nebulous haze of yellows and oranges wafted ethereally across his vision. There was something warm up there.

Wait here, he murmured into the comm, not waiting for a reply. The others took up covering positions with characteristic good grace.

He inched into the green-lit gloom, his own breathing seeming unnaturally loud in the hot confines of his helmet. The glowing icons on his HUD representing the other shaslas faded slowly to the rear, leaving him utterly alone. Two torleks from the corner, eyes fixed rigidly upon that unbroken line of pitted wall, he stopped and held his breath, listening.

Nothing. Nothing but the distant squeals of rodents and the drip-dripping of leaking water.

No conquest without control. Pursue success in serenity.

Fine. Breathe deep. Relax. And

He loped around the corner with a growl, gun held ready before him, mind racing. His vision exploded with whiteness: a nebulous heat signature too vast to understand. He winced and deactivated the filters, expecting at any moment the thumping impact of hell-fire shells or las-bolts. The world fragmented and returned to normal with a flicker, filling his HUD with redness.

Oh, sweet Tau he whispered, aghast. His stomach turned over and he took two gulps of air, forcing back the bile in his throat. The other shaslas chimed in expectantly.

What is it?

Whats there?

Kais? Report!

What could he say to describe it? It was carnage.

It was only a small chamber that didnt help. He could feel the heat from the walls without even entering, just staring from the doorway.

They were humans, at least: that made it slightly less difficult to stomach. The vivid ruby of their parts was almost unreal, an exaggerated fictional parallel to tau blood. Had the scene before him been rendered in cyan and grey rather than rich jhal-petal red, then the brief weakness in his knees that he felt might have overcome him. Hed seen so much brutality and violence since the trial began that some self-assured part of him had expected never again to be surprised, never again to feel that ugly rushing of blood and bile that hed endured all those taucyrs ago when his father stared at him in disappointment. Hed never imagined something breaking through the numbness in his heart again with the power to astonish and revolt him, but here it was.

A thin strand of redness parted company with the ceiling and fell, a syrupy

teardrop that pattered lightly against the slick grille decking.

He couldn't guess how many guela there had been, originally. The shreds of clothing and weaponry lying embedded amongst the pulped meat was silent testament to their multiplicity, a dozen different articles of fabric and leather lying shredded within the gore. It was as if the chamber had decompressed suddenly, hurling the flesh from its helpless inhabitants across floor and walls and ceiling. Anonymous strands of gore dappled the interior, sluglike lumps of tissue and muscle that slithered glutinously with the pull of gravity, flopping obscenely to the deck to vent their liquid cargo into the gullies on either side. Clumps of hair broke up the light catching wetness, half-sliced skulls stared in mute horror, eyeballs plucked and dangling, tongues bitten and lacerated in grisly astonishment. An arm, messily dissected at the elbow, grasped uselessly at the air, three fingers shredded to a pulp. A pink foot flopped from a fleshy stalactite above Kaiss' head with a wet slurp and a squelch.

A quiet voice at the back of his mind nodded that at least he now knew what they hid within their boots.

It was insanity. It was flesh frenzy, made real. It was as if the room itself was a stomach or a womb, its arterial walls wet with warmth and blood.

The other shaslas arrived behind him, impatient with his silence. Some of them had to be helped out of their helmets so they didn't choke.

Severus sat behind the code-chattering servitors and smiled.

They were bold, these tau. He'd imagined beings of far greater restraint and self-repression; in the last years the Imperium had openly flouted their territorial treaty and the xenos had rolled over and taken it, uncomplaining. He'd expected this operation to be swift and decisive. He'd expected a diplomatic surrender leaving him to wearily orchestrate some way of prolonging hostilities.

As it was, there was no manipulation required. He hadn't imagined in a thousand years that they'd summon the courage and recklessness required to attack an Imperial warship, the fools. He almost pitied them. Almost.

Their aggression quickened his pulse, filling him with visions of combat and war and bloodshed. His mind throbbed with it. Not long now, he reminded himself. Not long.

There had been too many leaks. The texts had been quite specific regarding the levels of concentration required, and he'd thought himself ready. Ten long years he'd prepared for this, and still the sheer strength of it had almost overwhelmed him. Contacting the Administratum had been difficult enough, a thousand tiers of bureaucracy to stunt the progress of his proposal and frustrate his efforts. Then, when finally the funds were made available

and the idiots on Terra had given him their official and enthusiastic sanction to continue, there had begun the laborious task of raising up his prison-citadel and his grinding, smoking factories, finalising every tiny detail. There had been moments of doubt, he couldn't deny it. But the text was there in black and white, alien symbols shifting and writhing with hidden power, and he'd known he'd been certain.

It would work. With enough blood, with enough screams, the final seal would shatter and

Yes. It would work, he was sure.

But the force had still taken him by surprise; he couldn't be sure how many times the pressure had vented through him, releasing gobbets of crackling empyrean to scurry away in a *mélange* of pseudomatter and amorphous outlines. It was getting beyond his ability to restrain, and the crew was growing suspicious. It didn't matter. Not long now.

And the Ultramarine librarian oh, what a gift! He'd become aware of the scrying, scratching mind-eyes of Brother Delpheus almost immediately, slamming closed his defences to prevent the inquisitive righteousness of the disembodied thoughts. The fool would be useful, when the time came. When victory and defeat were on the very brink of resolution, when the air was thick with crisis and triumph, he'd use that feeble little skull mercilessly.

He'd bring the ethereal to him. He'd gather up the most powerful pawns involved in this chaotic, maddening little game, and he'd use them. He'd spark a war and douse the system in blood. He'd shred the mind of human and tau alike to plant the seeds of his legacy and then, when all the finely carved pieces were in place, he'd break the seal and rise, rise, *rise*.

In the end, Kais was certain the team was pleased to be rid of him. The awe was turning to fear, he could see; a nervous timidity at his presence that the other shaslas were finding it harder and harder to conceal. They walked further away from him, they disliked him prowling the shadows behind them, they talked less and muttered more.

He heard the word Montau mumbled indiscreetly more than once.

Two had been lost to a guela ambush, rushing around a blind corner and erupting messily beneath streamers of gunfire, bodies jerking and shuddering as they toppled backwards. After he'd fragmented the humans, blithely rolling unarmed grenades along the corridor and gunning down the troopers as they quit their cover to flee, he'd been uncomfortably aware of the others glaring at him as he silently helped himself to the dead shaslas' ammunition and supplies. It was standard procedure cool and efficient but nobody expected it to be easy. He suspected the others thought of his detachment, his numbness, as being somehow unnatural.

Since discovering the mysterious abattoir chamber their military bravado had quickly waned. It was as if theyd seen the face of something real, something that convinced them of the ugliness and horror of their roles and left them in no doubt at all: this wasnt a game. This wasnt a safe little simulation in the battledome or a harmless domestic service operation. This was war.

Kais wondered how his father felt on his first combat mission. Efficient, doubtlessly. Didnt bat an eyelid.

Never lost his temper, never grew scared or furious. Ice cold, probably. Served the Greater Good with a clear conscience and a rigid application of the shaskento principles of combat. Flawless.

Comms with the *Ores Tashvar* were failing, garbled messages becoming little more than static. The path had grown divergent, hooded corridors branching away into blackness, multi-doored chambers leaving the group disorganised and disagreeable. Finally theyd come to a tight vent access that led downwards and away, wide enough for a single shasla only. The others favoured continuing along the cloistered hallway, relying on their cohesion with each other to sustain and protect them.

Kais felt no cohesion.

The others grated upon him and, worse, the knowledge of his inability to fit in made his guilt more palpable. Operating as part of a unit was an expectation placed upon every tau. Never alone, the Auns said. His isolation was a constant reminder of his flaw, and he hated it.

He was in the vent and crawling before the others could even protest. Not that they would, of course. He imagined them breathing sighs of relief as his retreating back diminished into the gloom of the tunnel.

Half a dec later and comms were a distant memory. The bright icons of the others had dwindled in his HUD as their path carried them further away, and in no time at all he was left alone, once more scampering rodentlike through brittle metal veins, his wounded arm aching from supporting his weight. He cut through the pain mentally and forced himself onwards.

Then things went badly wrong. Lost in the belly of an enormous creature, more vast than one mind could ever appreciate, his only sense of location was provided by the occasional breaks in the vent walls: thick membranes giving way to grille-slits and steel gauze openings. Through such indistinct portals he peered out on a world of dank chambers, strobe-lit techbays, anodyne sleeping cells and sterile, chrome-plated laboratories. Guela slouched here and there, filthy ratings and crew that seemed more akin to the rats they cohabited with than the pink-faced troopers Kais had grown used to. He scuttled silently through their midst, suit power on minimum to limit noise and heat emissions.

It wasn't enough when he came upon the Space Marines.

Briefly, he felt a moment of pleasure at seeing their blocky grey-green shapes through the light-striated grille, patrolling a corridor vertex with measured strides surely their presence indicated that he was on the right path. No mere troopers, he reasoned, would be assigned to guard something important. He nodded to himself and moved on.

One of the Marines swivelled in its spot, helmeted head tilting inquisitively, staring up into the vent. Kais froze.

The two giants appeared to converse, the first pointing vaguely towards the vent then shrugging, movement exaggerated by its vast shoulder guards. Kais could only guess at their discussion.

He tried to move, painful torils of silence and sweat. His heart sounded like a jackhammer in his chest, thumping in his ears and convincing him that the Marines could hear him.

Satisfied at the silence, they began to move away. Kais allowed himself to breathe out slowly, his mouth dry. Buoyed up by relief, his glacial progress carried him past the grille and slowly, cautiously, he began to relax.

The text wafer in his utility pocket slid gently though a las-singed fabric tear he hadn't even noticed and tumbled to the floor of the duct. It sounded like a cannon erupting in his ear. It was a gong peal, shivering and groaning noisily. It was a planet splitting across its equator, furious resonances echoing and reverberating throughout eternity.

He grabbed for the wafer, fear pulping his senses, even as the first bolter-shells sliced tubules of light spillage into the duct and detonated angrily near his feet.

He bolted, stealthy progress discarded in favour of blind panic. His limbs raised a cannonade of thumps and clangs as he slithered and dragged himself along the duct, gashes and lumps of debris pulverising the metal walls and turning the conduit behind him into a whirlpool of fractured metal and conflicting detonations. Bolter fire roared behind him, filling the tunnels with ghostly echoes and the sharp scent of smoke.

He scrabbled onwards, turning a corner, lurching upwards into a vertical shaft, taking tunnel branches at random with a stream of mumbled curses and groans. There was no rage here, no surrender to the Montau impetuosity only blind panic and helplessness. Again he knew how the clonebeasts felt during the taukonseh, sprinting impotently for their lives. But this time there was no recourse to turn and fight, no clever scheme to even the odds. In this labyrinth of intestinal tubes he was a parasite, at the mercy of any scalpel-wielding surgeon that could detect his movement and cut him out.

He stared at the tight confines and panic gripped him, an irrational horror at the suffocating closeness of it all. He yearned for the clear skies of Tau.

Is this how it feels to be buried alive, he wondered? Is this how it feels to die, lost and alone and flawed, with nothing to recall your existence beyond a decaying body, not even fit for the purity of a funeral pyre?

For the first time in his life, Kais wished he could remember a few more snot meditations on the subject of peace.

Shasla Duotan was so busy thinking of her recent team mate LaKais, so busy wondering abstractly how it must feel to have such unvented anger lurking inside ones soul, so busy recalling his shadow-dwindled form as it wormed its way down into the ductwork nervous system of the guela warship, that she wasnt fully watching where she, and the rest of the team, was going.

She turned a corner.

Something came out of the wall and ate her alive.

The vox clicked.

Il brothers hear m eneral alert, general al

Captain Mho glanced at his five battlebrothers and armed his bolt pistol. They followed suit quickly, racking bolters and meltaguns with professional relish.

nemy in the air-ve ng the ducts to infiltr tay alert.

Mito shot a look at Sergeant Tangiz, who shrugged. He thumbed his vox-caster.

Mito here guarding the generarium access-door. Please repeat, brother.

rother-captain, there are tau i rone-damned air du

In the air ducts, sir. Tangiz rumbled, huge frame twisting to stare at the various conduits and pipes lacing the ceiling. On a vessel this vast and ancient it was anyones guess what each intestinal tube contained. Mito rapped his knuckles against one experimentally.

Understood, brother, he voxed. Stay in touch.

Brother Iolux, Mitos youngest squad member, tapped the barrel of his bolter against a wide sheet-steel recess above his head. Should we breach one, brother-captain? Just in case?

Negative. This close to the generarium, who knows whats contained in each duct? Are you prepared to strike the wrong one, brother?

As the Raven wills it, brother-captain. I am prepared to take the risk.

Mito nodded to himself approvingly. Your zeal does you credit, brother, he said warmly, as does your altruism. However, in this instance caution is our best recourse. It would not do to be responsible for destroying the very thing we are here to guard, selfless or not.

I understand, brother-captain.

Good. Audio pickup to full. First hint of movement, dont spare the

ammunition.

The others acknowledged quickly and fell silent, listening intently, watching scanners for any signs of air movement. Mito flicked infra-red filters across his eye-lenses distractedly, disappointed by the lack of obvious targets. This whole operation had been deeply tedious; the sooner he and his company could return to Cortiz Pol and the Fortress Monastery, the sooner they might find action in campaign or crusade. A Marines place was in battle, bolter chattering, enemies screaming, not seconded aboard some navy vessel like a worn-out hunting dog, guarding his masters least valuable possessions.

Captain? Tangiz voxed, staring at the auspex of his motion detector. Something

I have a contact also, Iolux nodded, tilting his head to localise the sound.

Give me a bearing, Tangiz.

Standby It appears to be direct. Advancing along the corridor.

Not in the pipes?

Affirmative.

Range? Mito raised his pistol and thumbed the activation rune on the hilt of his chainsword, blurring the teeth in a hungry smear of steel and a feral growl of energy. The others lifted their weapons, taking up firing positions.

Twenty metres and closing.

I see nothing.

Detecting air movement.

Fifteen metres.

Nothing

By the Raven, what is this?

Ten metres Still closing

There! I see it! At the corridor apex!

Mito saw a flicker of movement and jerked his arm upwards to cover it. Whatever it was it was tiny barely larger than one of the green carrion birds from Cortiz. It shifted along the ceiling of the tunnel, ducking through and between the coils of cabling and pipework with unreal precision.

Servitor drone? Iolux grunted.

Too small. Too manoeuvrable.

Xeno.

Knock it down.

Mito opened fire with a snarl, enjoying the shuddering recoil of the bolt pistol. A localised thunderstorm began as the rest of the squad joined him, barking weapons hurling smoke and flame tears into the corridor.

The small shape caromed and weaved, tumbling and dodging faster than any living thing could react. It swept from side to side, dipping low to the

ground and then pirouetting upwards, coming to a dead halt, then streaking off in a random direction without appearing to accelerate.

The hallway surged. After ten seconds of the useless barrage the corridor was a wreck, shredded channels of bolter-craters spewing liquid metal and tight-knit cable-bundles, raising crumpled mountains across the walls and ceiling and gouging oceans from every surface. Melta ribbons left curious fronds of cooling metal-splash, smoke leeches from shredded bulkheads, strobing bolter fire sent flickering shadows capering and cackling across the devastation. It was madness.

Mito realised too late that the hovering object whatever it was had evaded every last shell, every last explosion and every last shimmering melta-stream. It moved impossibly, a tawny streak across the smoke and debris that anticipated and avoided every shot, drawing inexorably nearer to the Marines and the gateway that they guarded.

It barrelled from the smoke in a blur. Mito snarled in frustration and chopped downwards with the chainsword, putting all his energy and rage into that single arcing swing. And he would have made contact with the tiny drone, had it not chosen that exact moment to detonate.

Captain Mito of the Adeptus Astartes Raptors died in a haze of his own blood, howling in fury.

* * * * *

Kais dragged himself from the ruptured duct with a grunt and swung down into the corridor. Bits of grey-green armour, lined by slabs of flesh, littered the pulverised hallway. He clucked his tongue, impressed at the tiny drones destructive legacy. His circuitous journey through the ductway had led him, finally, to the doors of the vessels power core.

It had been a uniquely odd experience, deploying the little robot through an access hatch and feeding its non-sentient AI the simple commands it required. Kais had found it hard to not draw parallels between his own situation and the drones: both were mindless cogs in a rumbling machine, expected to do their duty without question or resentment. He almost envied the robots mindlessness. It could never be so tormented as was he.

Breach doorway bulkhead, avoid damage. As simple as that. Straightforward, unconflicting, uncomplicated and efficient. Everything he wasn't.

Just as Lusha had watched his progress via the optics of his helmet, Kais could sneak inside the drones vision and ride, spellbound, as it lurked amongst the shadows of the corridors. It felt unusually like flying, and despite being curled foetally within a small duct nearby, Kais found it difficult to

control the fluctuations of his stomach and balance as his vision recorded the dips and crests of the small machines progress.

And then the firefight! Hed never moved so fast, consciousness gyrating and corkscrewing with impossible precision, the drones sensors chattering and whistling in his ear as it estimated fire trajectories and ran the gauntlet. Hed barely even seen the Marines just green smudges of reflected light and chattering gunfire, growing gradually nearer with each hectic manoeuvre. Contact severed with a static hiss as the faithful little drone completed its approach and triggered the high-density klestak explosives packed throughout its chassis. Nothing had survived.

The destruction was strangely comforting. If a drone, the very zenith of mindless obedience and preprogrammed faith, could be responsible for such destruction, then perhaps he with his trail of bodies and bloodstained armour wasnt so far removed from the tauva as he seemed.

The bulkhead leading into the engine room sagged pathetically, pulverised hinges twisted out of shape. He picked his way past the barbarised bodies and ducked between the hanging gates, ears assaulted by the full fury of the reactors within. Across the chamber, standing skeletally on fragile gantries and pulpits, twisted amalgamations of human and machine more mindless constructs devoted to fulfilling their masters commands twitched their limbs and glared at him through narrow focussing eyelenses. One of them chattered, like a ratchet joint on a battlesuit.

Kais felt the weight of the explosives secured in his shoulderpack. He raised his carbine and smiled, anticipating the destruction he would soon wreak.

Koro Dalyth Menhe piloted his vessel with the consummate ease and confidence characteristic of his rank and caste. The *Telham Kenvaal* swung in a balletic spiral, rolling onto its side like a whale and disgorging another withering salvo of plasma orbs, railgun shells and AI-piloted torpedoes.

His target moved far too slowly to evade the barrage, its harsh guela hull twisting in a last-ditch attempt to present stern before the payload imparted across its belly. Fire and debris vomited into the vacuum, building-sized blocks of masonry and metal tumbling endlessly away in a clutching halo of cable tendrils.

A torpedo alarm gonged serenely and Menhe tapped at a sequence of control drones almost without thought. Immediately a squadron of Barracudas broke off from the dogfight raging along the *Kenvaals* toroq-side hull and ghosted into the firing line to intercept. Nuclear blooms flourished and dwindled in a heartbeat as the missiles were efficiently hunted and crippled, korvre pilots chattering their shorthand command language across the

squadron-comm. A solitary torpedo evaded their careful ministrations and Menhe rolled his eyes wearily.

Chaff, he grunted out loud, not for the first time.

A korel nearby nodded and tapped at her control console. Of course, Koro.

A swarm of blocky drones slipped silently from a hatchway beside the *Kenvaals* batteries and threw themselves at the torpedo. Whatever crude guela intelligence was directing the tumbling missile, successfully avoided two of the heat seeking machines before a third, random pulses of magnetic interference scrambling its guidance, flew serenely into its warhead. The detonation fell just short of the damage zone. Menhe breathed out, licking his dry lips.

A Mako-class warship smaller and slower than the *Kenvaal* but bristling with railgun emplacements and arms-factories breached the top of Menhes viewscreen and emptied a confetti of drone-piloted fusion capsules at the human vessel. Like swimming insect larvae, the bright pinpricks of light swarmed and circled around their victim, closing in on carefully selected targets before unleashing the actinic energies sealed within them.

The sight made Menhe think of a huge grazebeast carcass, stuffed full of firecrackers and tpretá decorations. It bucked and shivered from the inside, a living fire eating away at its flesh and leaving only the brittle, charred skeleton beneath.

Koro? Their life support and weapons are down.

Good. Signal the *Siol Shielteh* to finish the job. Were rejoining the *Ores Tashvar*.

Very good, Koro.

The *Telham Kenvaal* swung away from the hapless warship and accelerated towards the centre of the engagement zone. On all sides the toothy slabs of the guela fleet were outmanoeuvred and overrun by the smaller tau vessels, innumerable fighters and attack craft vying for superiority in the abyssal spaces in between. A latticework of munitions and missiles laced the voidspace, glimmering jewels that flickered and blossomed or winked out abruptly. Menhe silently thanked the earth caste for their breathtakingly intelligent computers, at a loss to understand how the guela could even begin to decipher such complex tactical showdowns without the benefit of automated systems.

Manpower, he supposed. A hundred thousand humans for every tau in the galaxy that was the current intelligence estimate. Each of those ugly angular warships was a world, a population of servile ratings and crew without a single freedom beyond the ability to worship their cruel, blinkered gargoyle-god. Every missile fired at them, every fusion capsule shredding its atoms in a purple welt of radiation and fire, was genocide on his part. It was a sobering

thought.

The *Ores Tashvar*, battered hull dappled with soot patches and protruding boarding craft, circled the *Enduring Blade* slowly. The two vessels, prow-to-prow, moved around one another like veteran prize fighters, each unwilling to present broadsides for fear of absorbing as much damage as they might inflict. Thus stalemated, they gyrated ponderously, twisting and rolling but always matching one another's movements; a slow, graceless dance of death, speckled by the furious fighter engagements all around. Torpedoes twisted and left dissolving ribbon trails across the nothingness, drones capered in a dizzying spiral to intercept or attack, chunks of debris and crippled fighter craft turned languidly and bodies, bloated and pulverised and frozen and crushed, slapped like brittle icicles against the *Kenvaals* hull. Menhe shook his head, revolted.

Target the engines, he grunted to the gunnery korel.

They're backing off, Koro. I have no firing solution.

They saw us coming Signal the *Ores Tashvar*. Tell them to take the toroq side, well go juntas. We have to kill those engines.

Its too late, Koro the guela are pulling away.

Pursu

Koro The surveyor drones make report

Menhe frowned. And?

Some sort of energy peak. Standby

Where? I want a location.

The guela warship, Koro. Aft segment.

The comm chimed.

O Menhe? This is Aunel Kovash. I suggest you pull back somewhat

Of course, Aunel. Whats happening?

It would appear our little gambit paid off, Koro.

Aune?

Prepare to engage, Koro. They'll be helpless in moments.

Menhe glanced bemusedly at the viewscreen. The *Enduring Blade* seemed to shudder abruptly, the bright lights glimmering across its continental surfaces dimmed and winked off before rising again in an angry crimson luminescence. The stabilising thrusters on its belly volcanic vents oozing a myriad of smoggy emissions and crackling energies flared briefly, bringing the unwieldy shape to a premature halt.

Menhe carefully pulled back the *Kenvaal* to match the distance of the *Tashvar* and watched, astonished.

Aunel? he commed. Whats it

The engines exploded.

In one bright moment the scaffold arrays and tiered buttresses arranged

around the *Enduring Blades* bulging engine vents plumed and shredded, a snaking chain reaction billowing up from beneath like pus from a wound. It spilled over in a garish torus of effervescent gases and vacuum starved flames, pulverising entire decks and fragmenting the rear sections of the vessel. The engine stacks heaved from their bases upwards as though expelling a final breath, long ribbons of mangled machinery and blocky architecture blasting clear from the wreckage.

Bloodwind Menhe hissed beneath his breath, forgetting himself.

A korvre trilled calmly, Brace for debris.

The *Telham Kenvaal* shuddered lightly as shards of fused, atomised detritus bounced from its hull. Gun drones quickly and efficiently atomised any potentially threatening wreckage.

Menhe stared at the devastation and gaped. The immobilised vessel swung around from the force of the detonations, the pathetic remaining thrusters venting impotently to control the gyration.

O Menhe? the comm said, startling him from his astonishment.

Y-yes? Uh, yes, Aunel?

I rather think that should slow them down. Focus on their juntas-side batteries, please. I want them crippled.

Librarian Delpheus felt the detonation all around him. Deep in the heart of the *Enduring Blade* its concussive force shook everything, roaring throughout the cavernous techbay which Ardias and his sergeants had commandeered. For a moment he was sure the walls themselves palpitated, a shuddering vibration running the length and breadth of the craft. He saw a ruby wet gut inside his mind, peristaltic waves of muscle contractions dragging him closer to digestion.

He shook his head, annoyed at the lack of focus. A thousand psychic screams churned across the ether, a final painful legacy of those who had died in the blast.

He sagged into a seat in the small console arena at one end of the techbay, watching as dust scurried tiredly from the duct courses around the ceiling, making the coils and loops of cables sway and buckle. A small illuminator on the wall, glowing with the angry red ochre of emergency conditions, spat sparks and clanked to the deck. The entire ship rumbled.

Captain Ardias scowled, clinging to a stanchion nearby. Hed led his command team from the Marines reclusium cells into the main sections of the ship, hoping to find a means of monitoring events vessel-wide. Delpheuss psychic senses had led them unerringly to this techbay, finding within a group of tech-priests that cowered at one end of the chamber, chanting purifying litanies over a bewildering array of machines and metallic constructions.

What was that? Ardias growled, shooting an inquisitive glance at Achellus, his squads Techmarine. The red-armoured giant scowled and bent over the multifaceted monitors and consoles at the end of the hangar, augmented limbs and armatures fluttering across the controls.

Stand by, he grunted, slender metal fingers sliding into socket relays with a cascade of rasps.

The engines have been destroyed. Delpheus said, his voice dead. Ardias looked up at him in surprise.

How do you know?

He sought for an adequate explanation, unable as ever to find the words to explain. He shrugged helplessly. I just know.

Achellus tilted his head and shrugged. The engines are gone, he concurred.

Heras blood Ardias growled, eyes staring into nothing. Delpheuss probing mind could feel the anxiety oozing from him, a helplessness entirely alien to one so used to the rigours and certainties of the Codex.

The Raptors failed the captain whispered. We werent there. He turned his gaze upon the Librarian, an intense glare of accusation and hostility. We werent there, Delpheus, at your suggestion.

It doesnt matter, Delpheus replied, keeping the quaver from his voice.

How dare you? Ardias almost roared. Countless lives lost and you think it doesnt matter?

The sergeants exchanged glances, uncomfortable with their captains palpable fury.

No, brother-captain, Delpheus maintained, closing his eyes, it doesnt. I told you before: we are needed elsewhere. Something is coming.

Ardias almost snarled. Brother Delpheus, my faith in the scrying of psykers even those that I count among my brothers extends only so far. He took a breath, controlling his temper. Thanks to this episode my faith is waning.

But

Codex Article 4256, sub-section 4, third lesson. *In the face of an overt and exposed foe, the pursuit of intangible threats is a waste of resource.*

I know the text, brother-captain. You need not remi

The Ultramarine is a realist and a pragmatist, Delpheus, who is careful not to divide his attention. I was a fool to accept your counsel.

It was not counsel, brother. It was truth. You will see, yet

My patience is spent. Assemble the company, we go to battl

Please! Delpheus found himself begging, desperate to vindicate his prophecy. In the Emperors name! I cant explain whats coming, but whatever happens, whatever we do, were needed here and now. I know it!

And where is here? Some forgotten techbay? Why bring us here?

I I dont know.

Ardias turned away, muttering furiously. Delpheus rubbed his temples, wondering vaguely whether the clawing, chittering pain in his mind would ever be gone.

His eyes fell upon the wall. The light fitting that had fallen open sparked lamely, coils of ruptured cabling hanging out. He frowned. There was something

Oh, Emperor-God no

He looked up. A series of looped ducts hung overhead, arcing flaccidly with the weight of years. A dribble of water parted from a cracked, rust smeared pipe with a quiet *plip*.

No no no no no

He looked back at the light fitting. The filament, exposed metal smoking and fizzing, lay half-concealed behind a tangle of wires. Overloaded and crippled by the force of the engines destruction, it blinked spasmodically:

Flash. Flash. Pause. Flash. Pause. Flash-Flash. Pause.

Brother-captain? Delpheus said, staring at it. Ardias turned to him with a weary grunt.

What now?

Im about to die.

The wall yawned open like a hungry mouth, wet edges slurping and sucking obscenely, malefic light blazing around its edges.

Something came out and stabbed him through the heart.

Kais hurried across arterial bridges.

They sprouted chaotically from high tiered walls, plush tapestries and red velvet walkways branching and intersecting tapering cords of steel and rock. They arched out across abyssal spaces, smoke-fogged and bat-haunted. This high within the vessels infrastructure, bulbous viewing galleries and veinlike corridors opened up onto glass-fronted panoramas of the void beyond. The distant flickering of lights and tumbling shadows announced majestically that the fleet battle continued to rage. Every now and then a shuddering, grinding roar like steel skies being torn open by celestial blades heralded another tau-fired salvo of munitions gouging into the crippled vessels flanks. He lowered his vision and limped onwards, hoping the blood trail was dwindling.

The explosion that had ripped the engines from the guela vessel had shaken him. He thought hed given himself enough time to get clear, setting the charges for five raikors then scampering, rat-like, along hallways and gantries; scuttling up ladders and diving into lifts. Hed broadcast several all-frequency alerts to the other shaslas aboard, urging them to get clear of the

engine decks as soon as possible. There were no replies.

When it came, the detonation had been like the laughter of a thunder god, consuming every other noise and blasting great waves of destruction along the vessel. Kais had lurched headlong to the ground, momentarily astounded by the force of his handiwork. The deck split open beneath him and he scrabbled, crying out, for sturdier ground. Chain reactions rumbled for long raikans, shaking loose bolts from the ceiling and killing the lights in a surge of crimson standbys. Ripples of deflected force surged through the bulkheads, eliciting a great grinding, gnashing sound that hurt his ears and left him shaking his head in confusion.

And then it was all quiet.

All quiet, for the first time since he came aboard this ugly mausoleum ship. No more distant semiconscious reportage of the sonorous engines, rumbling throatily. Hed wondered, skulking in the devastation, how many people, how many hundreds maybe thousands had perished. He could see them in his mind, pale lips gaping fishlike, as their lungs collapsed and their blood turned solid, tumbling out into the vastness of space.

He thought back to the decompressing chamber in the promenade aboard the *Ores Tashvar*. all those tau and guela slipping into nothingness in a rush of blasted air and silent screams. Hed been horrified at the raw power of the vacuum, a destructive force above and beyond his tiny, mortal rages and flaws. It had humbled him.

And what now, now that hed shredded a city-in-space and vented its chittering, maggotlike occupants into that same vacuum? Shouldnt he feel godlike? Shouldnt that single act of genocide obliterate whatever bitterness he might have in his soul, eclipsing utterly the numbness, outshining the relentless glare of his fathers eyes? Shouldnt it be significant?

No. He didnt feel a thing.

Dazed, appalled at his own detachment, hed stumbled upwards through the ships layers until he could go no further and there, seeing all around him the dislodged wreckage and shorted circuitry of his handiwork, hed moved onto the great buttresses and masonry causeways overarching the service spaces. Impossible pits yawned on either side of every path.

He was wandering blindly, trying to hail the *Ores Tashvar*, a lone figure picking its way towards the distant monolith of the vessels bridge, when he was shot in the leg.

Hed run, of course. He couldnt even see the sniper, let alone return fire with any accuracy. Warm dampness oozed across his hoof copiously, and he fired some random useless shots into the cavernous underhull and sprinted for cover, groaning and seeing stars with every step. Ensconced within a low-roofed bridge intersection, he shakily eased himself to the ground to examine

the wound. The projectile had punctured the muscle of his lower leg, gashing an ugly hole and singeing the flesh around it. He fished for his last medipack and applied it heavily, pushing down until he almost blacked out, then tying it off. The pressure was appalling, like liquid metal cooling and expanding around the flesh, but it allowed him to walk, at least. In a perverse way the pain was invigorating, a constant reminder of his vitality (and mortality) that cut through the numbness more completely than wholesale slaughter ever could.

So now he hurried across the bridgeways, keeping low, grunting quietly every time the ragged wound flexed inside its healing binding. He wanted to laugh, somehow, some morbid sense of absurdity bubbling up inside him. Hed killed hundreds today, thousands even. Hed waded through the blood of his enemies and relished every moment, hed overcome exhaustion and adversity with an almost supernatural aptitude, defeating the finest warriors these pale-faced guela could throw at him.

To be outdone now, to be maimed so suddenly by some distant, unseen foe beyond control or retaliation: it was ridiculous. It was like a cruel joke, like a clonebeast outrunning its pursuers and earning the admiration of the crowd only to be slaughtered for meat in the fiotorostai abattoir districts.

The bridgecastle loomed overhead, an ebony mace wielded victoriously above the ships spire-encrusted spine. Kais glimpsed it again and again through the irregular viewing portals above the causeways, set amongst the distant rafters and buttresses of the inner surface of the hull. Around its base an amalgamation of stone fortresses rose majestically into a single buttressed chapel, steel pendants and icons infesting its multifaceted roof, lowermost walls penetrating the ships shell. It rose up from within the *Enduring Blade* like a blistered melanoma, turrets for singed hair follicles and the angular bridge at its tumorous apex.

Hed wondered what to do after the engines died. He couldnt raise ELLusha on the comms couldnt really believe that there was anyone friendly left in the universe. He seemed so cut off, so immeasurably enmeshed within the grinding wheels of this confrontation, that nothing else was real. He resolved, mind clouded by anxieties, that alone or not he would attempt to pursue the goals his commanding shasel had set. So he headed for the bridge.

The chapels entrance, accessible only via a bridge that extended across a gulf between an outer and inner strata of the vessels segmentation, was a causeway-deathtrap. Its slender crossings were pocked by bullet holes and las-scorches and several dead tau lay in a huddle at its entrance. Kais sprinted past without stopping, his mutilated leg a dull crimson roar in his mind. The snipers, wherever they were, announced themselves in a flurry of ghostly ricochets and squib blasts, too distant for the sound of their firing to betray

their positions. The dead shaslas wriggled and shook obscenely as they absorbed the crossfire, not safe from damage even in death. Kais hurdled the butchered pile and landed with a muffled shriek, feeling the abused flesh of his leg tearing as he braced against the impact.

He rolled awkwardly and sprung forwards, sensing rather than seeing the impact craters disappearing behind him, and crawled upright feeling winded and dazed. The chapel swarmed open around him, an impossibly vast space that made him stagger in astonishment. Every pillar was a granite behemoth, ascending with prehistoric grace into the distant shadows of the ceiling, where leering gargoyles and stylised figures hulked and glared. Gargantuan stained-glass lenses fractured the light, daubing primary colours across his dirtied armour. He stood for a moment and basked in the massiveness of it all, insectified in an instant. Again he was a maggot, invading something incomprehensibly huge. How could he hope to topple all of this?

Then he looked around and a group of Space Marines was staring at him.

He lurched away with a cry, mind still fizzing with the shock of the bomb blast and the pain of his leg, melting his thoughts into an ugly hash of impression and details. Their features swam before his eyes:

Glaring yellow vision slits and grey-green helmets.

Domed shoulder guards and grasping segmented gauntlets.

Gunmetal weapons, racked and glaring hungrily.

But there was blood too, and the features didnt seem to interlink properly. There was something

He shook his head, wincing, and took a deep breath. When he turned back the image slotted into place with grisly precision and for the second time within as many decs he had to force himself not to gag. It was another massacre, another abattoir zone of gut-churning carnage, but this time not mere frail troopers that had been shredded. Their helmets were cleaved and shattered, eye lenses fragmented and the pulpy flesh beneath drawn out like mollusc meat.

Great gash marks rent the shoulder plates and armour fragments open, brittle edges awash with lubricating fluids and thick pulses of blood, running together in colloidal swirls. Kais found himself running a gloved hand in morbid fascination along one such tear, wondering what manner of blade could have so neatly parted such powerful armour.

There was no sign of a culprit, only a shredded perimeter of bolter craters, plasma-scorched metal and smoothed puddles of solidified melta-damage to attest to these abstract chunks of armour and flesh ever having lived.

Kais swallowed hard and let his eyes wander upwards to the red carpeted staircase that rose from the airy centre of the chapel. Somewhere above this bloody grotto was the bridge.

He looked back down at the fleshy detritus and stooped to pick something up.

Delpheus, sprawled on the deck, gnashed his teeth together and fought to stay conscious. It was happening. It was all happening. *The masked fiend, inverted.* All coming true.

Bolter fire hammered at the air, a furious staccato making his ears ache. Phosphorescent light blossoms capered across his eyesight, amorphous puddles of purple and blue left hanging nebulously in their wake.

Something screamed. He felt his first heart, punctured cleanly with a single razor-sharp blow, palpitating faintly and beginning to die. He expelled a gurgled lungful of air and was unsurprised to taste a thick syrup of blood and bile pooling from his mouth.

A His voice was a lugubrious swamp croak, bubbling pathetically. He spat a gobbet of filth and tried again. A Ardias

Something blurred above his head, a crackling haze of form and light, rocketing across his vision with a hyenas giggle. Bolter fire chased it and it was gone, a scampering shape swallowed by the shadows. Nothing he was seeing made any sense.

Whats he mumbled, brain too detached to operate. He wanted information, wanted to cry out for a weapon so he could help his comrades fight back this this

What is it?

His first heart died by degrees, contractions diminishing in strength until it perished with a final spasm, its artificial counterpart accelerating its pulse to compensate. The overburdened organs hammering exertions made his head pound and his eyes ache, every throb tightening his blood vessels with a percussive roar. His legs wouldnt work. He couldnt even feel them.

Hed lost his gun in a slick of oily blood spill, lurching around when the When the whatever-it-was had ripped from the wall hungrily.

Ardias? he tried again, voice weak. Captain?

More bolter fire. More death. Another scream as another shape blurred past. It was all happening in another world to someone else, as abstract as a cloud formation and just as unthreatening. He almost laughed.

A Space Marine helmet, lacerated head rattling inside, tumbled past him on the deck. Somewhere a plasma gun *foomed* breathlessly, destructive energy orb roaring its impact into the air. Delpheus blinked agonised tears out of his eyes.

A pair of sky-blue pillars stomped heavily from the pain haze beside him, cold hands cupping his head with a tenderness belying their brittle form. Captain Ardias glared down at him, concern etched incongruously on his

grizzled face. He sounded choked.

Delpheus? Theres help on its way. Youll be fine.

Delpheus smiled through the blood slick, hearing the concern in his captains voice. Ardias was a terrible liar.

I was right he gurgled.

You were right. Were needed.

Ardias looked away with a growl, bolt pistol tracking something across the periphery of Delpheuss vision. It screamed and disappeared in a gout of ichor and light. And then there was a voice in Delpheuss mind.

Twisting, probing. It was a cruel, venomous thing: slicing through his weakened defences and sinking claws of shimmering empyrean into his brain, ripping and stabbing. Playing him like a puppet.

Nnnn he gurgled, fighting it. The look in Ardias eyes told him: Youll be dead soon.

The thought fortress in his mind fell, once-impregnable walls sundered. The other mind, wherever it was, surged inwards, gripping at his lungs and larynx and manipulating his tongue.

The bridge he hissed, unbidden. Get to the bridge.

Ardias nodded. Of course. Ill protect it with my life.

Stop the battle. *Not my voice! Not my voice!*

What?

Delpheus tried swallowing, constricting his throat, biting his tongue anything! It wouldnt work. Weak and violated, his mind wasnt his to control. Hed failed. Hed succumbed in his final moments. The shame overwhelmed him.

Stop the battle, his traitorous voice repeated. The tau will parley. The new threat is more important.

Theyll cooperate? Just like that?

You must trust me.

I do, brother I do.

The teleport arrays. They will take you to the bridge.

I understand.

The shadows came down around his vision, like night drawing in. The controlling presence in his mind retreated stealthily, satisfied at its manipulations. Everything went cold.

The last vestiges of courage and honour inside Delpheuss soul a sputtering flame striving against the darkness ripped forwards into the myriad skeins of possibility, crackling with psychic portent, and imparted one final warning, uncontrolled by whatever puppet master had spoken through him before.

The the rogue element. He lives on borrowed time. Seek him out. Find the warrior with the bomb in his head. Trust him.

What? Brother, I dont understand

Trust him

More gunfire. More screams. Delpheus gurgled.

The fog closed in, the blackness rolled over him, the Emperor smiled.

The world went away.

Severus smiled to himself, collecting his thoughts quickly.

The captain had looked so trusting so sure of his dying comrades instructions. So much for the formidable defences of an Astartes Librarian! Hed played the fading fool like a rag doll a brittle mask to be worn when required and cast away when redundant.

Not long now. The Ultramarines would intervene and stop the battle. All the pieces would gather together and he would *take* them all!

Ensign Kilson was sitting at his console aboard the bridge, unable to forget the hulking grey-green super-warriors hed escorted through the vessel earlier.

Naturally enough the command deck was in a state of barely restrained anarchy, ranking officers screaming furiously at ensigns and servitors, apparently holding everyone but themselves responsible for the destruction of the main engines. Kilson did his best to allow it to wash over him, too experienced in the field of delegated blame to feel personally put out by the shrieked accusations.

A little part of him was thinking: were crippled. Were under attack. Theyre coming for us here and now and soon, without warning or mercy, were all going to die. The whole bloody lot of us.

But mostly he was too busy remembering the tremulous impact of the Space Marines footsteps, their glowering yellow eyeslits sweeping left and right, their weapons clashing against their breasts. He felt like a child again, back in the uptiers of CaerParav Hive, dreaming of meeting that seasons premier gladius fighter or collecting wafer engrams of the sectors most renowned commissars.

Hed met them, those graceful grey-green brutes. Hed spoken to them, by the throne! A little part of him, detached from the termite nest madness of the bridge, felt like somehow, in a small way, it had touched divinity.

When the xenogen invader crept into the bridge and liquefied his body in a gust of thermal energy, Ensign Kilson was smiling serenely.

The bridge died.

Intruder!

Get it!

Cover the officers! Cover the off

Watch the instruments, damn you! Keep working!

The meltagun was heavy in Kaiss grip, a blocky cumbersome thing that lacked the lightweight grace of his carbine. When hed prised it from the mutilated grip of a dead Space Marine in the chapel below, hed inspected the various coils and switches that clung like scales to its base. Eventually he decided that the trigger was the only control he really needed to understand and, leg wound still aching uncomfortably, had climbed the twisting staircase towards the bridge.

Ensign! Get down! Get down!

Servitors to the front!

Mechserv #34 respo

Emperors mercy!

It didnt shoot so much as dissolve its victims. He stood with legs planted sturdily, arm muscles bunched to support the growling, churning weapon. A splayed column of superheated air roared from its rounded muzzle; a devastating horizontal fountain that blasted flesh and bone apart like ash in a gale. The armsmen, supposedly guarding the bridge, were the first to go, shotguns igniting in their hands before they could even be brought to bear. Brass-mounted consoles slewed away in a waxlike sheen of melted surfaces and burning components, drizzling liquid metals across the room.

Deck officer! Deck officer! To me!

aaaaaaaaaaaa

sweet mercy my foots gone oh Living God

killitkillitkillit!

A trio of servitors, blade-limbs grasping out for him, slunk away like snow devils in the sun. Their flesh peeled off in a second, leaving asymmetrical frames to twitch and shudder as their lubricants ignited and their strut supports melted to nothingness. The last few guela, hair singed and clothes scorched, exchanged terrified glances and sprinted clear. He enveloped them in the fusion stream and watched, heart racing, as they floundered and flapped and became part of the deck.

aaa

gkhh

And then there was silence. He might as well have been the only living being in existence, in that moment. A solitary figure, exhausted and wounded, death clinging to his limbs like a black shroud. The enormity of the command deck wrapped him in a bubble of solitude and silence, even the clicking, whistling gauges and controls faltering away into an aural smog. From the vast viewing dome set above the room, the infinite reaches of the void peered

down upon him transforming him into a solitary bacterium staring in wonder from its perch on the back of a great, dead whale. The meltagun slid from his hands with a clatter that he didnt even notice.

Somehow he felt cheated. He hadnt yet resolved his feelings. Hadnt passed or failed his Trial by Fire with any certainty either way. He could still feel the Montau devil lurking below the surface of his mind, hungry to escape and flex its bloody claws again. He felt prematurely amputated from his rightful resolution a quest that had neither ended in glory or ignominy, but rather fizzled out before its true conclusion.

He supposed, abstractly, that he should contact ElLusha. Hed cleared the bridge. The *Ores Tashvar* was defeated. The ethereal would want to know. Instead he found himself wishing for more, glancing about in the hopes of finding another enemy to fight.

So, like a light splitting through tormented clouds, like the impossible surreal luminosity of the tauva, radiant and glorious at the termination of a long, snaking pathway, fate conspired to fulfil his request. An elevator grumbled nearby, rising with frozen slowness.

The doors began to slide open. Kais drew his knife.

* * * * *

Constantine burst from the officers lift in a black mood.

Hed wasted at least half an hour on some damn fool meeting requested by Severus, the preening bastard. Evidently the governor was either missing or dead, conspicuous in his absence at the boardroom. As a result of the unnecessary diversion Constantine had been unavailable to command his vessel in its moment of need, its engines had been systematically destroyed and now who knew what xenogen devilry the tau were planning to inflict upon his crippled vessel? Rushing back to the bridge, he was unable to contact his command crew for a status update, and, to top it all, had found himself confronted by a grisly abattoir of ruptured Space Marines in the chapel outside his command deck. The Raptors had failed.

An imperial warship, Constantine believed implicitly, was impregnable. The religious certainty of the Navys dominance, of their ships deific majesty, had been drilled into him since his youth, years before. For his command to irrevocably collapse in such a short period of time; for his god/ship to be so crippled and sundered in his absence and beyond his control, it was a feeling not unlike falling. Everything hed ever known, everything hed ever been certain of and taken for granted, fell away from beneath him in a rush of flame and debris and blood.

Fine. Let it fall. But let it not be said that in his most testing hour Lord

Admiral Benedil Constantine had shirked his duty as a leader.

He would have Severus executed for ineffectual command, the time-wasting fool. He would dispatch messages conveying his great displeasure to the Administratum and to the Raptors fortress-monastery on Cortiz-Pol. Hed regroup the Fleet Primus, file an immediate request for backup from the Secundus and Tertius armadas, then obliterate every last one of the grey-skinned abominations currently wreaking havoc aboard his vessel. Heads, he decided furiously, would roll.

Besides, there were still the Ultramarines. Hed drawn upon the Raptors to guard the vessels principal sections at Severuss demand, aware that Captain Ardias and his men might well regard the choice as an insult. Well, it couldnt be helped; the governors Administratum documents had given him implicit command over the situation, and if he chose to snub the warriors of Ultramar then there was nothing Constantine could have done about it. At least now, in the midst of this madness, he had an entire company of the Imperiums finest warriors to assist in his liberation.

With that thought in mind, he stamped from the elevator and found a long, wickedly sharp blade pressed against his throat.

Nk, he said.

Be quiet, you. Gloved hands gripped him from behind and the voice was thick with an unknown accent. An exotic, unrecognisable odour assaulted his senses, its explanation startling him.

X-xeno! he flinched away from the contact, gasping. Briefly he was struck by the insanity of finding himself more terrified of contamination than of physical death, but the thought was quickly chased away by added pressure upon the knife. He almost choked. The figure behind him pulled him into the shadows, like a spider seizing its prey.

I said, be quiet, the voice insisted, three-fingered hand gripping his shoulder. Who are you?

No-hkkk-*nobody*.

Lies.

What?

The colours and the metal circles. Youre important. The hand tapped pointedly upon the constellation of medals pinned to Constantines chest, making them sway and jingle prettily. The aliens words were recognisable but clearly strained, impeded by a limited Low Gothic vocabulary. Constantine was briefly impressed that a mere warrior could speak an alien tongue at all (after all, could he, an admiral, speak tau?), but recognised it at once as a dangerously heretical thought and purged it from his mind.

No he hissed. J-just an ensign

Lies. Who are you?

Nobo

The xenogen cut his throat. It was white fire a single burning ribbon of pain beneath his chin that sliced open with dreadful slowness.

Not deep, he prayed, shaming himself with his own cowardice, not deep enough to kill.

He whimpered as the pain continued to blossom, warmth pattering serenely across his collar bone, soaking into his robes. The xeno replaced the knife centrally and pushed harder, tensing for another slow, surgical slice. This time, Constantine could tell, the cut would be deep.

Admiral! he groaned, begging the Emperors forgiveness, knees almost buckling. Im the admiral! In charge! Commander!

A koro?

What?

You command the vessel?

Yes!

And the fleet?

Emperors undying mercy yes!

Then listen. You just listen.

Constantine had the distinct impression that the alien was confused, thinking hard about what to do. He began to wonder at the possibilities of somehow exploiting the situation when full pressure was reapplied to the knife, making him gag.

You contact the rest of your fleet. You tell them

Warp take you! Id rather die!

You tell them to fall back. You tell them to leave.

Youre pathetic! Constantine fought to bring a cold laugh to his voice, breaking through the quaver of fear and hoping the creature was convinced. They wont listen. Theyll know Ive been compromised.

We have your ship. We have you. It is best that they leave. There will be no more conflict.

The Emperor doesnt compromise, xeno.

The knife bit into this throat again, nicking at his skin. Where is this Emperor now when you have need of him, human?

Constantine suddenly felt a long, long way from home.

Cut him cut him cut him cut him

It hissed and raged in Kaiss mind, a song of blood and anger and violence.

Make him bleed cut him cut him

It was a killing lust born in frustration. Everything had seemed so simple before, killing and destroying anything that moved, cleansing the bridge of all

life, capturing this quivering, whimpering koro. Hed felt like he could do anything, overcome any obstacle, crush any enemy.

But there were objectives here. Diplomatic outcomes.

The comm-link with the *Ores Tashvar* was still down. Hed tried it twice, desperation mounting. So hed tried to consider, just as before in the stygian gloom of the prison compound. Hed felt like he owed it to the tauva to think to force a conclusion to this conflict that didnt rely on the squeeze of a trigger or the slash of a knife. To end it in blood, he felt, would surely be to allow the Montau devil its victory.

The personal glory of single-handedly forcing the guela fleet to withdraw, he had to admit, was alluring. Would it elevate him to hero status? Would it secure his promotion? Would it

Dont even think it.

would it have made his father proud?

It was selfishness of the highest order, he saw with a guilty wince, imagining Ju shaking her head and patiently reading out another patronising meditation upon upon the essence of humility, or the righteousness of unity, or something like that. Still, the image was hard to shake: cheering crowds, grateful ethereals

But of course it wasnt that simple, and his clumsy threats and attempts to control this tall, grey-haired human were going badly awry. He thought back to the porvre from the expedition to Queh-quih and for the first time saw beyond the bumbling enthusiasm and almost comical attempts to placate the natives, appreciating instead the merchants grasp upon linguistics, his subtle words and hints, his mastery of interpersonal communication. Kais solemnly wished for a water caste diplomat now.

Tell them to withdraw, he shouted, pushing down on the blade.

Im-hekkgh-telling you it wont work!

Then you die.

Fine! Do it, abomination! I die in the knowledge that your race is doomed! Theyll be crushed underfoot! Kill me and have done with it I wont sully myself for you!

Kais wanted to growl, enraged by the futility of his threats. The guela started to laugh madly an hysterical cackle with more fatalism and terror in its tones than any great sense of amusement.

The rage shivered in Kaiss belly, widening its pin tooth grin and flooding his blood with fire. His arm muscle tensed. He closed his eyes and concentrated, fighting for control.

Focus focus focus focus

Cut him cut him cut him cut him

Calm. All you need is calm and balance and equilibrium and unity and

*Blood and death and bravery and reward and heroism and
No expansion without equilibrium. No conquest without control
Be a hero! Show the world! Show them you are your fathers son!*

His grip tightened on the knife and he prepared to drag it sideways, seeing in his mind the ruby waterfall springing from the gash. The grey haired guela sensed what was coming, moaning low in his throat.

Time stopped. From somewhere nearby there came a flash of light and the hiss of a thousand serpents, wreathed in lightning. Kais paid it no attention.

There was a voice, shouting. It couldnt drown the voice in his mind: *Cut him cut him cut him!*

The Montau devil bared its fangs triumphantly and shrieked. The blade bit.

A fist like a sky-blue meteor slammed into his helmet, lifting him off the ground. For the second time that rottaa the colour drizzled out of his eyes and he sagged to his knees, swallowed mercifully by thick, impenetrable sleep.

Stop it! the Ultramarine growled, more of his vast brethren bursting into existence with the crackling of teleportation energies behind him.

Constantine, shaking in horror, attempting to disentangle himself from the unconscious alien at his feet, fought for calmness.

Stop what? he quailed, quivering hands clamped to the wound on his neck.

The war. The fleet confrontation. The order to repel boarders. *Everything!*

13.30 HRS (SYS. LOCAL DOLUMAR IV, Ultima Seg. #4356/E)

Korvesa 66.G#77 (Orbsat Surveillance) chattered to itself, complex energistic movements inside its shell shuttling packages of information from data stream to memory core. A sequence of algorithms interrogated all incoming data for security breaches or hidden frequencies and wordlessly deposited the filtered remains into a carrier package reserved for the porhui media. These developments would be considered high priority, the little AI quickly established, and sought to edit them into some sort of intelligible sequence.

The guns had stopped. The fighters and Barracudas had pulled back, redocking to fuel and make repairs. The fleets had regrouped: two shoals of sullen, scarred predators, called off by their respective alpha males.

Damaged hulls gaped and vented into the starlit void, scattered wreckage tumbling thickly in the nothingness.

A withering selection of message bands and tight-beam commstreams threaded from ship to ship within each fleet; to 66.Gs multifarious senses they were rendered as vivid as glowing plasma cords or superheated cables a network of pulsing channels that conspired to drown each pack of vessels beneath luminous gossamer threads.

The largest commstream of them all, visible to three of the drones filter optics as a conical blast of green light, hung suspended between the *Ores Tashvar* and the *Enduring Blade*.

A personnel shuttle left the tau fleet, enveloped in a solid phalanx of fighters. 66.G ran a routine scan, detecting seventeen distinct lifesigns aboard the central craft. One bore the unique energy signature of an ethereal, and in immediate response the drones stabilisers began to charge in anticipation of movement.

The *Tashvars* AI released a quick databurst to the various drones and computer controlled craft lurking at the periphery of the scene: negating directives designed to protect Auns at any cost, their guardianship uncalled for in this instant. 66.Gs engines returned to inertia without having fully powered up and, along with the silent swarms of other drones, returned to its lonely vigil.

Its various optic clusters tracked the personnel carrier carefully, internal processors exploring routes of action and possibility, until the bulbous vessel scooped itself inside the *Enduring Blades* cavernous forward hangar and the

fighters broke away. The Auns lifesigns, thus shielded beyond the black vessels hull, blinked out.

* * * * *

Kais slept.

He dreamed, a little. It was not pleasant.

Constantine stood amongst the wreckage of his bridge and glared sullenly at a stack of viewscreens, distorted images jumping and crackling.

Cant you make them any clearer? he snarled, venting his frustration upon the tech-priest manning the monitors. The robed figure scowled and shook its head.

The first screen showed a door, sliding open. *They* came aboard in a gaggle, different sizes and shapes and uniforms making them seem, from a distance, disordered and cluttered. Only when they began to walk, guided by a white-faced ensign in a singed, torn uniform, did their rigid efficiency become apparent.

The warriors, tan armour spotless and domed, asymmetrical helmets glaring beadily through emotionless optics, fanned out cautiously on either side. There were twelve in all, four on each phalanx wing and four others sporting bulkier armour and longer, multi-barrelled weapons who walked silently at the head and the rear of the group. Despite the polished hoof claws in the place of booted feet, their footsteps made little, if any, noise upon the slatted grating of the deck.

Following behind them came an extraordinary group. Walking with an easy, relaxed gait, peering around at the devastated innards of the *Enduring Blade* with undisguised interest, the next four specimens were taller and thinner than the warriors. Constantine watched their nonchalant progress with a frown, suspicious at their confidence. More even than their galling coolness, their bizarre clothing snagged at his attention. Had they not been xenogens, contaminating his ship with every step, he might even have laughed.

The fabric of their garments was unmistakably alien: strange two-tone material that caught the light with a subtle iridescence, revealing hidden colours and patterns with every new movement. The cut of the robes was stranger still: it was as though the makers had seen images of human Navy uniforms and attempted to emulate them, without fully understanding the significance of individual parts. One xenogen wore an exquisitely hung greatcoat with floral lapels, another a stylish silver jerkin with purple braids festooning the shoulders. One even sported a decorous face mask upon its brachycephalic brow, vaguely similar to a storm-troopers gas mask. The

tallest of them (a female, he guessed, noting her narrow shoulders and slender legs), who walked with a confident stride and wore a domed hat above her grey face, was dressed tightly in a gaudy imitation of an officers jacket, complete with dangling jewels upon the left breast (easily mistakable for medals, from a distance) and diamond pips in the collar. Constantine shook his head, not sure whether to be revolted or amused at the inaccurate replication.

But behind them came the most astonishing figure of all.

Taller still, robes so white they seemed to glow, honour blade tapping out a steady rhythm as he walked, came the ethereal.

Constantine glanced to his side briefly, hoping to catch some indication of the Ultramarine captains reaction to these alien interlopers. The Marines grizzled features bent their full concentration upon the image, leaving Constantine unable to tell whether Ardias was impressed or disgusted or indifferent: he seemed to wear a perpetual grimace of disapproval that was as apparent now as ever.

The admiral had felt a small surge of terror and panic, at first, when he found himself in the presence of Space Marines, but professionalism was ingrained into his very mind and hed quickly reminded himself that, technically, he out-ranked Ardias. Provided that the gargantuan warrior couldnt see inside his chest at the racing heart therein, he was confident hed preserved his aloof dignity. The Space Marines scowl of superiority, of course, wasnt helping.

Constantine looked back at the screen. A delicate tracery of silver chains adorned the ethereals narrow neck, looping around his shoulders until they became part of the fabric of his robes, a sparkling pattern too fine for the clumsy monitors to represent. A decorous hybrid, somewhere between a bandana and tiara, covered the figures elegant forehead, leaving its dark eyes peering from beneath a glittering constellation of jewels and patterns.

Bloody peacocks Constantine muttered, but his heart wasnt in it.

The tech-priest grunted, motioning towards a second monitor. Theyve reached the tertiary adjunct.

Constantine watched the group in silence for a moment, impatience growing steadily. Youre sure this is wise? he blurted, finally, not entirely able to disguise the doubt in his voice. Ardias raised an eyebrow.

Theres a new threat. He returned, obviously in no mood to justify himself. I told you that. We need every resource we have. He nodded at the screen. These xenogens are of little importance, in the grand scheme of things. Until weve identified what were dealing with I want this sordid little confrontation stopped.

But

No arguments.

Constantine fumed, unable to restrain his indignation. He cleared his throat noisily and grumbled, Its not right, you know Inviting them aboard like warp-damned dignitaries. Theyre scum, not royalty.

I dont recall any inviting, admiral. Consider the situation logically. Their forces are superior to our own, their units are dispersed across your vessel, their ships outnumber us two to one and they appear unencumbered by the inadequacies of command that you appear to have demonstrated. The admirals hiss of anger at the insult went unnoticed, the Marine continuing his tirade with finality. Just be grateful they were eager to parley. They could have finished us if theyd chosen to, and you know it.

A bubble of aggression burst in Constantines mind. Is it not better to die in service to the Emperor, he hissed, than to consort with abominations?

The Marines glare bored into him, his voice suddenly cold. Do not presume to lecture me on ethics, lord admiral. The taus time will come, on that you may rely.

And in the meantime th

You would do well to moderate your tone of address! I have seen the true face of our enemy, Guillimans oath! These tau are nothing in comparison.

The room descended into a furious silence, both men turning to watch the strange procession of aliens move from monitor to monitor. Constantine stroked his moustache irritably.

Any word from Governor Severus? he barked at the tech-priest, losing patience. The robed figured shook its head, concentrating on the camera controls.

Perhaps hes already dead. One can but hope.

The silence dragged on. The admiral fidgeted.

Its time, the tech-priest intoned, artificial eyes glowing. They will reach the concilium chamber shortly.

Constantine nodded and threw a sidelong glare at Ardias. Are you joining us for the negotiations?

I think not.

Oh?

Talking is not my strong point. He fingered the bolt pistol at his huge waist absently. I shall monitor events from the Observarius. Our mutual acquaintance is already there.

Mutual acquaintance?

Ardias smiled grimly and pointed towards Constantines throat, leaving him self-consciously adjusting the ruffle hed employed to conceal the ugly wounds on his neck. The admiral remembered the firm alien grip on his shoulder, its accented voice in his ear. He shuddered.

I thought you killed it, he muttered.

You thought incorrectly.

It almost murdered me. It slaughtered the bridge personnel, by the throne!

Indeed. It is a great warrior.

You're impressed! Constantine regretted opening his mouth instantly. For a second he really thought Ardias was going to kill him, eyes flashing dangerously, fist clenching with a metal-on-metal groan.

No, the Marine said eventually, visibly controlling himself, I am not. But one does not open a peace negotiation by slaying the enemy's finest soldiers.

Constantine didn't dare reply. The clutching gauntlet looked as though it could mash his head in a second.

Just leave it, Ardias snarled, perhaps unconvinced by his own explanation. I have my reasons. Now get going.

The Ultramarine turned his huge back and stomped away towards the observation galleries. Constantine watched him go, summoning the shreds of his dignity. He rearranged his dress uniform meticulously and stepped through into the concilium boardroom to await his guests.

Shadows curled claws and tentacles around his face.

Someone, far distant, said Welcome.

He was falling, perhaps. Tumbling head-over-hooves into an endless pit.

Someone said, Please accept the returned greetings of his Eminence Aunel Tau Kovash, who trusts his noble host is well.

The words made sense, possibly. He struggled to turn over, to stare upwards to the top of the hole as it receded into a distant, impossible point.

Someone said, falteringly, Many thanks I am Benedil Constantine admiral of the fleet. Won't you Won't you take a seat?

There was light up there, at the entrance to the pit. He thought he could see something moving.

Someone said, uncertain, Take a seat? A gift, admiral?

Someone said, Oh, no I mean, would you like to sit?

Behind him, deep in the abyss, something rustled and giggled and hissed.

Someone said, His eminence prefers to stand, but is grateful for the offer.

Someone replied, a little too sharply, I wonder if his Eminence is able to speak for himself?

The thing behind him, the Montau devil (he knew it!), stretched out a scaly hand for him, scythe-like claws grasping upwards.

Someone said, His eminence prefers to speak through me. I am his tongue and his hand, in this circumstance.

Someone said, angrily, And you are?

He concentrated on looking upwards, willing himself to rise, praying for the world to return to him, for his cascading form to levitate into the light.

Someone said, I am Porel Tau Yisten.

The words made sense. They were important, he knew.

Someone said, Fine, fine. Uh. As you wish. Allow me to begin proceedings, then, by protesting in the strongest terms at the unprovoked hostility demonstrated by your people, that has brought us to this poi

Someone said, Admiral, perhaps you are confused. Our hostilities were the result of provocation.

You're asleep, Kais. You need to wake up now.

Someone said, Well, I disagr

Someone said, Admiral, his eminence is unconcerned whether you agree or not. Let us not mince words. We are in a position of superiority. We have all but seized your flagship and possess the ability to cripple your fleet further still. Let us not waste our time with protests and accusations.

He could see, now, in the light at the pits head. Something opening, breaking apart like mighty doors in the sky.

He could see

Someone said, voice thick with indignation, If you're so convinced that you can defeat us, why are you even here, begging for peace?

Someone said, Admiral, we have no great fondness for genocide. A withdrawal is all we desire.

He could see

Oh, by the One Path, it was eyes. Great, dark, bottomless eyes; his fathers scowling face filling the sky. Filling the world. Filling his mind with expectation and disappointment.

Flawed, the eyes said. Useless.

The devil behind him cackled and warbled and giggled, and its claws closed around his waist.

Kais lurched awake with a hiss, hands clawing at the air to ward off the nightmares. Cool air brushed across his skin with a bizarre freshness: a sensation of newborn helplessness. He realised slowly that his helmet was gone, his gun had disappeared and he lay in

He blinked.

The room was guela, unmistakably. All the usual ugliness was apparent: a tumbling intestine of tubes and pipes infesting the ceiling, grille-striated walls of bleak gunmetal, stone block recesses surrounded him on three sides and the usual damp, musty smell of humanity (now unfiltered by the helmets breathing systems) hit his senses like a fist.

But there was something different about this place. As he levered himself

upright his hooves made contact with a soft, spongy floor covering, momentarily unset-ding him as he ascertained its solidity. Here and there plush crimson tapestries and drapes decorated the bulkheads, spiderlike icons of meaningless heraldry blistering their surfaces. The chamber was better lit than any hed seen aboard the *Enduring Blade* thus far, giving it a sense of cleanliness and regality that was out of place in such grim surroundings.

There was a conversation going on, somewhere.

Someone said, I see so You expect us to retreat, is that it?

Kais turned his head towards the sound, still shaking off the torpor. The fourth wall of the room was a window. Bathed in the light from whatever luminous chamber lay beyond, standing with colossal hands on hips, a Space Marine stood and stared. Kais felt the panic rising in his belly.

He straightened with a hiss, frantic sleep clouded thoughts racing, eyes seeking out a weapon, a hiding place, anything!

Relax.

The Marine was staring at him, helmetless features grizzled and scarred. It cocked an eyebrow and gave what, to Kais, seemed an insincere, unimpressed grimace.

I thought you might appreciate seeing this. The figure jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards the window and turned away. A disembodied voice, relayed through a small speaker set above the window, said: In essence, admiral, yes. His Eminence feels theres little to be gained from continuing our hostilities. Kais, staying alert and wary of traps, edged towards the window, curiosity piqued. Our resources, the voice continued, are more than enough to overcome your own, highly effective though they undoubtedly are. We feel, nonetheless, that even in victory there would be great cost to all concerned. Weve demonstrated our seriousness, and offer our gratitude that you agreed to negotiate despite the initial delay.

The window looked out onto a wide circular room full of standing figures. Kais crept closer, expecting a trap, throwing furtive glances at the Marine. The figure, clad in blue armour with inverted hoof-arch icons on its shoulder guards, maintained its appearance of dismissive nonchalance.

The voice went on after a pause, its pleasant pitch undoubtedly tau in origin. Kais clung to the certainty that others of his race were nearby, letting the words themselves disguised behind a friendly, trustworthy tonality wash over him. His Eminence wishes to make it clear that breaches of the Dalyth treaty and other hostilities will no longer be tolerated, and that the mercy we have demonstrated this rotaa will not be repeated in future.

This is your idea of mercy, is it? Seizing my vessel and demanding my surre

We would remind you that the attempted seizure of our vessel preceded

yours, and his eminence suspects that, had you succeeded, a surrender on our behalf would have fallen on deaf ears. You should consider yourselves lucky, he believes.

The figures beyond the glass began to resolve as Kais drew nearer. He spotted a domed pol-hat characteristic of water caste diplomats and began to understand.

Theyre negotiating for peace? he murmured, more to himself than the scowling Space Marine. The figure turned his way nonetheless and fixed him with another imperious glare.

Thats the idea. Your diplomats are to be congratulated, alien. They posture and make threats, all the while managing to sound as friendly as you like. The Codex approves of shows of strength when properly executed.

Kais felt utterly bewildered. To be so close to one of these vast killing machines, unarmed and unprepared he ought to be dead, not standing discussing morality like a lecture-hall porel.

The wall speaker said, Lucky? Ha!

Whats going on? Kais muttered. Whats happened?

The Space Marine gave him an appraising stare, pursing his scarred lips. Just watch.

Kais crept closer to the window, fighting the screaming nerves. The wide chamber on the other side of the window was packed with figures, divided along a central line into human and tau groups. The guela looked angry, various officers hissing into one anothers ears, waving their hands expressively. A row of storm-troopers waited silently along one wall. At the table was the same tall, grey-haired man hed almost garrotted earlier, frowning in distaste.

He turned to the Marine quickly. How long since?

Since you wrecked the bridge? About an hour.

A didactic memory at the base of Kaiss mind chipped in efficiently, identifying an hour as two thirds of a dec. Things had moved quickly since he was knocked out.

Who are you?

Ardias. Captain Ardias of his Imperial Majestys Ultramarines.

Why didnt you Why arent I dead?

Call it a sign of goodwill. The assurance was not convincing. Ardias turned away.

Kais returned his eyes to the window, staring down at the tau group. At its head, dressed in guela-imitation robes, a phalanx of water caste diplomats led by Porel Yisten stood and whispered to each other calmly. Kais had seen ELYisten once or twice aboard the *Ores Tashvar* before the rotaas madness began: if anything the grim angular surroundings of the guela vessel

exacerbated her already stunning looks. Shaslas and shasuis were arranged carefully against the wall behind them, watching their human counterparts suspiciously.

Kais wanted to beat his fists on the window and scream: Dont trust them! Get out! Get out!

Ardias glanced at him shrewdly, as if reading his thoughts. Kais frowned at him, uncowed by the humans stare. They returned their attention to the assembly simultaneously.

Aunel Kovash stood in thought, eyes wide with ancient wisdom, leaning on his honour blade. In Kaiss eyes he wore a corona of power and focus, a halo of intellect that eclipsed the brightness of the rooms artificial lights. He leaned down gracefully to whisper something to the porel. ELYisten turned to the admiral, smiling.

His eminence wonders why you chose to parley so abruptly, when all our previous attempts to communicate met with failure.

Kais could see the admiral was frustrated at having to converse with the ethereal via ELYisten, tired eyes flicking from one to the other as he prepared his answer. Kais wondered vaguely whether such conduit conferencing was normal, or carefully designed to distract and disorient. The water caste were as notorious for their cunning as their diplomacy.

Whats that supposed to mean? the admiral barked, caught off guard.

Merely a matter of interest. ELYisten purred, her grasp of the human tongue far in advance of Kaiss, smiling in a remarkable impression of a cheerful guela. His eminence would be disappointed to discover this little conference was a pretext to bring him aboard. He is aware of his value to your ah tech-priests.

The admiral, Kais thought, looked furious. The Marine beside him grunted. Tell me is paranoia prevalent throughout your race?

Kais didnt answer.

How dare you! the admiral neighed in the boardroom, indignant. The very suggestion is

We suggest nothing, admiral. We merely wish to forewarn you of the repercussions of such entrapment. His eminences failure to return to the *Ores Tashvar* will, of course, result in immediate retaliation.

Of course, the admiral hissed with poor grace, knowing he was beaten.

The question, ELYisten continued, remains pertinent. She sounded like she was enjoying herself. Why the sudden change of heart?

Kais watched the admirals face closely, trying to decipher the strange emotions playing across it. A sidelong glance at Kovash told him the ethereal was doing the same penetrative glare fixed firmly on the old guelas features. The admiral looked up directly at the window. Kais swivelled in his spot,

confused.

The Marine nodded once, almost imperceptibly.

We have a problem, the admiral said, that requires us to reprioritise.

Go on

Another glance at Ardias. Another half nod.

A secondary threat. Already aboard this ship.

The admirals decorum left him in a long drawn-out sigh. He seemed to deflate, suddenly seeming old and tired. ElYisten shared an alarmed glance with the ethereal. You know as well as I, the admiral growled, that under normal circumstances wed rather die than consort with *fr*with your kind. But we have reason to believe these circumstances are far from normal, and until were certain of what were

The boardroom doors opened with a fierce clang, eliciting a wave of instinctive head twists. The figure that stalked in had donned a vast fur coat since Kais had last seen him, an impressive mantle of tawny and blood red markings that widened his already substantial frame. His face was unchanged, twisted in a petulant sneer.

It was the man from the viewing gallery in the prison torture chamber, and Kovash watched him enter with admirable calm.

The shaslas lowered their guns slowly, satisfied that the unarmed figure was no threat. Kaiss quick impressions of the situation were manifold: the Space Marine grunting angrily, the admiral hissing in fury, the newcomer grinning hungrily

Whats the meaning of this, Severus? the admiral roared.

Admiral so good to see you again. I feared you lost in the invasion.

Youre not supposed to b

And, look the newcomer bowed to Kovash sarcastically, feral grin widening further. My old friend Ko-vaj. How are you? Its been so long.

Severu!

Oh, *hush*, Benedil do. You know I have all the authority I need to be here.

Ardias shook his head, muttering under his breath.

Down in the chamber, ElYisten recovered from her shock superbly.

His eminence extends his greetings to I assume you to be Governor Severus, and hopes his late arrival will not disturb these proceedings further.

Severus fixed the porel with an amused grin and nodded cheerfully. Ah yes One breed to fight, one breed to labour, one breed to talk He returned his stare to the Aun. and one breed to stand about looking smug. Hows the head, old chap? Not too sore, I hope.

Kovash ignored him.

If we might return to the subject in hand? ElYisten persisted doggedly, looking pointedly at Admiral Constantine. The grey-haired man was glaring

at the preening new arrival with barely restrained hatred. The porel coughed politely; another subtle guela mannerism. Admiral?

Yes. Constantine turned back to the conference. Yes, of course. As I was say

This is a sham, Severus declared, crossing his arms. In all my years Ive never seen anything so shameful.

Severus! Constantines face was bright red, like an unplucked grehli-berry. You will be silent or you will get o

Humans greetings xenogens aboard like old friends? For an admiral to have sunk so low He spat on the floor, face creased with disgust. You should be ashamed, Constantine.

There are circumstances youre not famil

No circumstance warrants infection, admiral. Isnt that what they say?

I will not tolera

Noble sirs Elyisten sung, voice somehow conspiring to be soft and penetrative at once. His eminence grows impatient. We have attended this meeting in good faith with the aim of preventing further hostilities. We did not come to watch you argue amongst yourselves.

Constantine was about to speak, Kais could see, pompous apologies forming behind his ruddy face. But Severus got there first, eyebrows arching disdainfully.

You will hold your tongue, alien! he growled, talking over the admirals garbled protests. How dare you speak to us in that manner?

His eminence has de

His eminence is not worthy to even share our air. There will be no resolution here. This conflict will be resolved in blood, not in words!

Kais frowned. Something was changing in the tall guelas manner, a deeper resonance in his voice, a certain enlargement. Without appearing to grow at all somehow he was looming, radiating a sense of presence and importance impossible to ignore. There was a whispering at the back of Kaiss mind, just beyond his ability to discern. The air was thick suddenly, greasy with a hidden charge.

Emperors blood the Marine growled, fingers curling around the weapon in its holster.

And Governor Severus spoke three words: ugly syllables that made no sense to Kaiss ears but somehow inflamed his thoughts, crackling in the air with vile potency and appearing to cast a shadow across the world. If they could have been given form, Kais thought, the words would be maggots, coated in a slick of blood and writhing from the mans mouth in a haze of crimson power.

Severus smiled and slipped a manicured hand into his coat pocket,

withdrawing something with a flicker of light.

The insanity began.

Trooper Moyles was an uncomplicated individual.

When the brightly garbed commissars had toured the cities of his homeworld, Gilreh, he hadn't even paused for thought, so taken was he by the plush uniforms, the rousing tales of heroism and bravery and the prospect of promotion and sliding scales of payment. He'd signed up without hesitation.

The uniform, upon reflection, had been a poor reason to join the Imperial Guard. It had changed, since then, five times.

On the Adeptus Munitorium standard enrolment forms, his IQ was marked down as 75. He had never, ever succeeded in anything in his life.

But the Guard accepted him, showed him which direction to point his gun, trained him until his muscles showed through the flesh on his arms and chest and made him worth something. He had never been so happy in his entire life.

And then quite out of the blue, during a routine guard duty in the boardroom of the *Enduring Blade* (during which he'd seen his first real xenogen), a tall man from the planet below pulled a knife out of his fur coat pocket and opened up Trooper Moyles' jugular vein like a ration pack of synth-et being punctured.

He wondered, vaguely, why everything was going dark.

The Marine ran, drawing its weapon in a fluid arc of articulating armour.

Kais swivelled at the sound of its clattering steps, mind spinning, breath short. The memory of the troopers' blood, thrashing into the air, was fresh in his eyes. The audio speaker hooked to the other room exploded in a cacophony of shouts and exclamations. Kais called out to the hurrying Marine.

Ardias! What's?

Your gears through there, the hulk roared, not slowing, massive fingers pointing to one side. Stay out of my way.

The sapphire figure vanished through a door. An alarm began to ring, hurting Kais' ears. He turned back to the boardroom to be confronted with a scene of riotous reactions: the guela shouting all at once, the tau backing away in confusion, the nameless trooper at the centre of the hubbub sinking to his knees, fingers clutching at his throat.

The blood drizzle didn't fall. Where the chaotic splatter effervesced into the air it hung immobile, as if spraying across some invisible shape suspended above the ground. Like water falling on glass.

woop-woop-woop-woop

The lights went orange then yellow, flickering on and off with a dizzy,

oscillating rhythm. A cold voice, piped mechanically throughout the vessel, declared:

Anomalous energy readings detected, all decks

The pulsing lights were an angry heartbeat, a palpitating gut, a crumpling lung. Kais fought to see into the adjoining room. The blood cascaded down, long tentacular rivulets dragging at his attention with some sensory gravity: forcing him to watch. The slit-throated trooper was dead now. Mostly.

A grisly rectangle of blood fluid formed over his corpse, red-black sheen taking on some sinister internal light, agitating and bubbling as it began to glow a deep, angry crimson.

The governor was laughing, long, dry *whoops* of air splitting his face, bloodslick knife brandished like a trophy. The glowing rectangle shimmered once, twice, three times.

ELYisten, voice recognisable above the terrified groans and moans of the guela, said: Whats

Then something came out of the rectangle and cleaved off her head. Time did its slowing-down jig.

intruder detection intruder detection all decks intruder al

Blast shields closed on the viewing gallery windows and Kais hammered his fists impotently against them, adrenaline short-circuiting his mind.

Hed seen it. Whatever came out. Black, like oil. Like cancer. As big as the blue-toned captain, Ardias, but rust-pied and metal toned. Spines and chains and skulls. Red eyes. Red eyes like a desert reptile, but glowing from within. Hot embers in a cold fire grate.

He wished the screaming through the audio speaker would stop.

Without really thinking, he spun around and sprinted for the side door to collect his wargear. All he could think, all he could see in his mind, was a glowing pair of embers and a word: *Montau*.

The weight of the world surprised him, at first. Hed been too long without gravity, too long a shade of a shade, a wraith lost inside eggshell prisons of smoke and light.

A single splatter of blood, that was all it had taken, eventually. The final sacrament to bring the walls crumbling down. Three words of power to undo the ancient curse and a drizzle of red fluids to open the doors. There had been cracks already, of course. Imperfections growing by the moment, allowing his brothers brief forays into the blocky, unfamiliar solidity of the real.

For those lucky few, freedom had been short-lived, but they returned with tales of blood and carnage, with immateria-axes stained gore-red, with words of violence and hunger for killing. It fortified the rest of the prisoners, giving them hope and anticipation.

Hed howled away his bloodlust into the warp prison, watching as second by second his release grew nearer. Three millennia had been a long time to wait.

This Severus, this pawn of the Master, this small thing with its books and its incantations, this fur-hung fool: it gashed apart the throat of a single man-thing and the prison collapsed, the walls splintered with warpfire fury, the inchoate empyrean beyond wafted and grasped and

Keraz the Violator was born into reality with a roar and a shriek and a neck-splitting lunge that pulverised in an instant the years and years of inactivity. The blood flowed and the world screamed and he laughed and laughed and laughed.

There were xenogens here: grey-faced things that cowered and shivered in his shadow. It didnt matter. Blood is blood is blood. Red or grey or green or black, he didnt care; it gushed and gouted, its rain splatter a cherished baptism against his armour, its slick ebbings hanging in matted chords from the chains wrapping his gauntlets. There was gunfire, somewhere. More of his brothers, emerging behind him. Less devoted, undoubtedly. Theirs was a service of command and obedience, an undivided gaggle of beliefs controlling their actions. They lacked Kerazs devotion to a single aspect of their dark pantheon.

Blood for the Blood God!

Skulls for the Throne of Bone!

As inescapable as the night, the madness came upon him. Gunfire couldnt hurt. Plasma orbs and pulse shots were a background staccato, rattling on his armour ineffectually. Only the killing was real.

A figure stepped into his path; a shape shrouded in a torus of energy and protective power that stayed his bloody hand, forcing a bellow of fury from his ancient guts. He recognised through the red haze the pinched features of Severus, his liberator, and tried to turn away to find a new plaything to crush, a new morsel to dissect.

Stop, the man said, and unbidden his feet obeyed. He had no choice. His roar of anger quaked through the world. Severus smiled, enjoying himself. Take these ones. Take them to the planet surface. He pointed to a dark recess, blood-splattered walls shadowing a pair of figures, and then he was gone, stepping lightly through the shimmering portal.

Keraz hefted his axe, chain edge shrieking, arrow wedge shadow falling across the cringing shapes. One was human, he saw without caring, old features open in terror, grey moustache quivering in a silent moan. The other was xeno, standing rigid and tense but betraying not a hint of fear.

It didnt matter. Terror wasnt compulsory only blood mattered.

But the axe never came down at its zenith the words of power gripped his

body and Severuss command overcame him. As meek as a lamb, but raging and boiling within, he dragged the two figures into the portal and vanished in a gust of energy and heat.

Kais was too late.

His mind still couldnt be operating properly, surely. Surely he was too overwhelmed by this sudden escalation of events, this inexplicable horror. Surely that was why nothing was making any sense.

Figures appearing from nowhere, fluttering creatures cackling and gibbering, everywhere was blood and fire and hate. He thought, am I going mad?

Perhaps.

Whispers like cobwebs, like dessicated corpse talk, like the papery rustling of a million inserts, filled his mind. Perhaps this was a guela trick? Some hitherto unknown technology and resource theyd concealed from tau intelligence until it was needed? Yes yes, that must be it.

A hidden army of berserk monstrosities, waiting to be unleashed; a cunning deceit theyd arranged to ensnare the Aun and crush the tau He wondered briefly if ElLusha and the others, still aboard the *Ores Tashvar*, would concur. This was the remit of Auns and shasos, not of flawed shaslas.

But

But that wasnt right As he stumbled through twisted corridors, humans were screaming and dying, black monstrosities sweeping from glowing portals to murder the terrified paleskins, dragging them away to Aun-knows-where. And things, vermin with red-scale skin and spiny thorns, fluttered and swooped, scavenging amongst the bodies for flesh. They left trails of slime and pus as they crawled, chattering and giggling like infants.

Reaching the concilium was a blur. Had he slept? Was he, perhaps, dreaming? Where was the scowling blue-armoured Space Marine? In all this bedlam Kais would have welcomed a familiar face, even one so threatening as Ardiass.

Towering devils. Black-on-red-on-rust armour. Eyes like volcanoes. Axes and guns and blades and claws. Spines and chains and leering skulls. Shadow Marines. Hate Marines. Pain Marines.

The voice in his brain, hissing and whispering, fluctuated and diminished a poison echo like a ringing in his ear. He wondered if everyone could hear it, or if this was some awful new symptom of his madness.

The *Enduring Blade* had become distilled insanity, everywhere the clamour of screams and blood and gunfire. Even encased once again in the comforting envelope of his helmet, even cradling the blocky meltagun hed found decs before, the fear bubbled up in him and refused to cave in to an

assault of meditation and litany. He was running scared.

Portals like great sucking lips opened on every side, smacking together wetly and disgorging their cackling cargo, ghost trails of warp and plasmic splatter following them.

Oh, he was scared of death, that much was true. Scared of pain and oblivion. Scared of the laughing black-armoured devils with their glowing eyes so like the Space Marines yet so different. Scared of insanity and madness and rage. Scared of failure.

But more than that, scared of himself.

In his darkest dreams, in his soul, this was how he imagined the Montau. As he ran for the boardroom, hooves clamouring on the deck, wounded leg forgotten in the rush, he saw the ember-eyed hulks twisting to face him, pausing in their bloody carnage, weapons raised, and each time there came a hesitation: a split-raikan pause in which, he knew, the armoured creatures were staring at his battered form, his blood encrusted wargear, his crater-dented helmet, wondering

Which side is he on?

But he was gone and sprinting before the hesitation was over, and the gunfire was just a distant chatter at his back.

Ignore the screams.

Ignore the whispering.

Get to the ethereal. Save the ethereal. Focus. Concentrate.

The door to the boardroom wouldnt open. Stomping footsteps closed in behind him. Something cackled nearby. Moving without thinking, he opened fire with the meltagun, dragging its slipstream of boiling air across the immovable bulkhead beside the door. A ruddy glow appeared wherever it touched, oxidising treatments skittering across the metal in a ballet of blue fire circlets. It was too thick to succumb to the assault.

A wide pipe above the sealed doorway clicked and clattered, bruised metal protesting at the conflicting expansion and contraction of its heating and cooling surfaces. Kais shrugged mentally and turned the gun on the conduit directly, its searing melta stream puckering and flaying the metal.

The thing behind him came around the corner.

The pipe ruptured and a flare of promethium flashed across his vision. The explosion hurled him off his feet, toppling him backwards. Everything tumbled downwards in his helmet display, a blur of metal and flame. His back found the deck with a breath-exploding thump, curling him over in a ball. A sheet of fire vomited overhead: a horizontal geyser of burning vapours sprouting from the ruptured pipe. The black-metal monster behind him shrieked as the fire lance struck it head-on, mashing it against the corridor wall like a swatted beetle.

Kais didnt look.

Smoke and dust circulated all around, an opaque fog bisected neatly by the burning gas. He scrabbled beneath the flamespout on all fours, patting out the glowing speckles of singed fabric on his arms and legs. The door, absorbing the full force of the detonation, had ceased to exist.

Kaiss triumph was short-lived; he leaped into the boardroom with a shout, gun brandished hungrily before him, to find blood. Nothing but blood. Limbs off, heads removed, bodies slumped. Goggle eyes and gaping mouths, like fish.

ELYisten stared at him reproachfully from a heap of flesh in one corner. Her body was on the other side of the room. Guela and tau, so scattered together that the bloodslick was a pale violet, a swirling galaxy of red and cyan running together. Here a tau arm lay, knuckles clenched, beside a de-limbed human corpse.

There was a symbolism here, perhaps. A sense of unity, a sense of physical sameness. Given a talented enough porhui journalist, this scene might mean something. In death, were all the same, perhaps.

But it didnt.

All it meant to Kais was a furious scrabble to remove his helmet, a bulge-eyed moment of staring around, unshielded by the layer of artificiality his HUD provided, and then a bilious surge of nausea from his guts to his mouth. This time he couldnt keep it down.

His mind tumbled upside down, the whispering clogged his senses like mud and reality shifted like a compass.

Ardias stared at the madness around him, acquainting himself with the extent of the situation. That things had gone catastrophically wrong was undeniable: the peace negotiations were ruined and the hidden evil, Delpheuss masked fiend, was exposed. Still, despite it all, despite the horror and the death, despite the utter collapse of events, Ardias entered the fray with an air of professional relish. He had been born and moulded to fight, and in so doing he justified his existence. It was a strangely reassuring notion, and he could see no point in denying it.

With a chattering bolt pistol in his hand, with a snarling chainsword cleaving the skulls of his enemies, it was difficult to appreciate the wider calamity the physical realities were too close at hand to ignore. Ardias killed and shouted orders, commanding a meticulous purge, flanked by his indomitable, unwavering brethren.

Governor Severus had invited Chaos onto the *Enduring Blade*.

Chaos. The antithesis of order. The Great Terror. To investigate too far into the whys and wherefores of the Dark Power was to become clouded and

tainted by it, so great was its potency. The mysterious agents of the Inquisitions Ordo Malleus spent centuries struggling to bind and purge the madness, fully aware of the futility of conventional sciences and technologies. Instead the Taint, the very concept of Chaos, was embroiled behind a paradigm of religion and occultism, a stringent galactic code that stated clearly: the Emperors light is pure. All else leads to Chaos.

It was bound to the warp. It was bound to the real and the unreal together, it was bound to those things invisible in the mundane colours and clamours of materiality: thoughts, feelings, spirits and souls and angels and devils.

Chaos was a thing of division and conflict and contrast, a thing of anarchy and insanity. It would pull down the structures of humanity; of the universe; of time itself. It would shatter the galaxy for the reward of a pretty noise or murder a million billion men just to appreciate the hue of their fluids. It came from nowhere and went to nowhere.

It was everything the Ultramarines were not. Ardias exploded a chittering daemon thing, fluttering at him with hooked teeth bared, and thanked the Emperor for this holy opportunity to cleanse the taint. There were mistakes to be rectified here.

Ten millennia ago the Emperors glorious crusades to reunite humanity faltered and crumbled. The Space Marine legions, deified avatars of retribution and human endeavour, infallible in their purity and steadfastness, shining icons of strength and wholeness, had *rotted* from within. Like a worm ceaselessly and blindly hunting for a vulnerable entry point, Chaos had writhed its way into the very heart of the Imperium. Half the Space Marine legions were seduced and corrupted. Humanity held its breath. The Emperor all but died, sacrificing himself to save his race.

The Dark Legions scattered.

Ancient history, of course. Whispered lessons from the Librium at the Fortress of Hera. Arcane heresies guarded and studied by lexicaniums and codiciers and epistolaries. A blot on the data sheet, a stain on the purity of mankind. But the Legions were still out there, biding their time, murdering their way closer and closer to the heart of the Imperium. Who knew where they lurked, where they would strike next, where their shadow would fall?

Ardias snarled and swiped at a horned helmet so hard it exploded, unable to restrain the unnatural hatred and fury that rose in his gut, guiltily aware of the deviation of his thoughts from the measured approach that the Codex counselled.

The shadow had fallen across the *Enduring Blade* and he vowed silently to grapple against it until the last of his energy was spent; a loyal servant of the Emperor could do no more, and was expected to do no less. These ancient warriors, blackened with evil, who had once stood shoulder-to-shoulder with

Ardias ancestors, these fallen angels; they must be punished.

Preserve your ammunition! he voxed, firing off a short burst at one bellowing Chaos thing. A cackling daemon formed from a warp portal at his side and was efficiently cleaved in half by Sergeant Mallich's chainsword. Ardias nodded gratefully and moved on.

Brother-captain? This is Sergeant Larynz.

Report.

I have the third tactical squad, two decks above your position. There are incursions at all points. These portals, brother have you ever seen their like?

Negative. Some dark sorcery lies at their heart, Larynz, you can be certain of that. Courage and honour!

Courage and honour!

Regroup on my signal, sergeant. I fear we must sacrifice this vessel.

Sir? You can't mean that?

Regroup on me, Larynz. No questions.

Of course, brother.

Ardias barged onwards along the corridor, swatting drooling daemonettes like flies. This far into the ship, the walls themselves seemed corrupted structural damage and ancientness combining with some indefinable alteration to make everything seem organic and twisted. Not for the first time Ardias felt like he was walking in a peristaltic gut, wet walls shivering with hungry villi around him.

Captain! the vox chattered, urgently. I've located a communications chamber. The rust-red shape of Tech-marine Achellus waved to him along a side artery, prominent mechanical appendages emulating the movement of his arms. The figure beckoned into one of the innumerable chambers that lined every corridor, where Ardias could see lights blinking and brass-bound gauges fluttering. In a vessel as ancient and labyrinthine as an Emperor-class battlecruiser, subsidiary control rooms and communication hubs lurked in myriad corners. Given enough time, a seeker could locate any resource aboard a ship of such magnitude.

Ardias strode into the room, nodding at the cob-webbed controls.

Can you operate them, Achellus? he asked, perplexed by the endless arrays of meaningless switches and dials.

By the grace of the Omnissiah, the Tech-marine nodded, vaguely tracing the shape of the Holy Engine in the air, I believe that I can.

Squad? Ardias voxed, watching Achellus's cyborg fingers dancing across the console. Assume overwatch positions outside this chamber. In the name of the primarch, hold your ground!

The bolters rattled and the daemons chattered and the hissing, whispering influence of Chaos filled the air with greasy nausea. Ardias bent over the

controls, thinking hard, and ground his teeth against the cloying voices in his mind that made it so hard, almost impossible, to lower his bolter and lift a comm transmitter in its place.

Shaso? Theres something happening on the battle-cruiser

Is the dropship returning?

No its

Its what?

The drones are picking up energy signatures. Weaponsfire, maybe.

See if you can raise anyone.

Their communications shields are still operative.

We cant reach any of them?

OUdas rubbed his temples wearily, feeling exhausted. The return to the primary bridge of the *Ores Tashvar* had been accompanied not only with the unpleasant task of removing the smoking bodies scattered thereon, but with the realisation that, lacking a koro and having failed to persuade the Aun to remain aboard, responsibility for the vessel and its crew was resting firmly with him.

The korel with the unenviable task of filling OTyras shoes gave him a despairing look. None, Shaso. What action?

None of them had been prepared for this rotaas madness.

Theyre taking too long he decided, glancing around at the anxious faces, tense bodies perched in ruined seats. Power up the weapons. No more chances.

Drones scurried to comply, exhausted air caste personnel tapping at mangled controls, struggling to maintain their professional calm. Udas shared a glance with ElLusha, rubbing his hands together uncomfortably. The tension throughout the command deck was palpable.

Shaso? a Korui mumbled, frowning. Were getting a signal. Very faint but its definitely directed at us.

Tau?

No. Its guela.

He nodded, pursing his lips. Lets hear it. Branch it to the rest of the fleet too.

The korui passed a long finger through a sense beam and abruptly a storm of white noise rippled across the bridge, high frequency squeals shifting in tone until a single voice a guela voice crackled through and resolved.

s the *Enduring Blade*, hailing the tau flotilla. I request acknowledgment Its not working, Achellus. Try a different frequency.

The korui gave Udas a plaintive look. Shaso?

He scratched his chin, tapping a hoof thoughtfully against the deck. A series of tiny drones with flashing message icons circulated around his head koros and shasos throughout the flotilla hurrying to give their advice. He waved them away.

Open a channel.

What little white noise that remained on the communication channel resolved with a tinny *pop*. The ugly guela voice halted in surprise.

Enduring Blade, this is the *Ores Tashvar*. Identify yourself.

Captain Ardias of the Ultramarines. You must listen to

Where is Aunel Tau Kovash?

Never mind that, we

Where is he? We are poised to strike. Return him now.

Stand down! You must listen! We face a mutual threat!

Lies. Cut the channel. All vessels prepare to engage. His blood burned.

Wait, Emperor damn you! The ethereal has been taken most likely to the planet surface.

By who?

Chaos, warp take your eyes! *Chaos!*

OUdas frowned. The guelas voice was full of certainty and conviction, as if he was expected to recognise the name of this alleged enemy. The word was delivered with terrible resonance.

Chaos? he repeated, unfamiliar syllables sitting awkwardly on his tongue.

The voice replied with heavy exasperation: Oh, you dont I havent time to explain. The dark powers! The warp taint! Evil!

This is ridiculous. I wont listen to another w

Theyve taken him and the admiral. We cant determine how theyre travelling but listen to me, they are beyond our reach, for now. Attack this vessel and you will waste time and blood that would be better spent purging this threat! Were under assault.

OUdas shook his head, lips curling. Guela lies. Delaying tactics.

The voice almost roared, a venomous litany of frustration and abuse that pushed OUdass patience over the edge.

Cut the line, he growled, directing a pointed look at the korui manning the comms. The channel closed with a sedate peal.

Shaso, ElLusha muttered from his alcove at the rear of the bridge. What if hes telling the truth?

Dont be ridiculous.

But if there is a third party involved

Wed know about it. An army doesnt just spring from nowhere.

Agreed but Shaso, isnt it worth investigating? Caution in the face of

threatis that not the teaching of the Yierlaretan meditation?

OUdas breathed out, reluctantly conceding. All this talking exhausted him: his nominal grasp of the guela language, coupled with his natural impatience for diplomacy, made him re-evaluate his feelings towards the water caste. He began to wish sincerely that ElYisten hadn't taken all of her porui assistants with her to the human ship.

He waved a weary hand at the Korui and the channel reopened.

Human Convince me of this threat.

Contact your own units. There are still plenty of tau aboard ask any of them for an appraisal. Space Marines do not lie.

OUdas shuffled his feet. To reveal the shortcomings of their technology was unthinkable but Without the Aun, they had nothing left to lose.

We can't contact our units, he said, neutralising his voice to dampen the significance of the admission. There's a signal-retardant field around your vessel.

Stand by Was there a hint of smugness in the voice, he wondered? A triumphant lilt to its tone at having identified a weakness? A muffled conversation filtered dully through the speakers, another guela voice joining Ardiass. He thought he could make out a sonorous chant, like a prayer, then the clicking reports of switches being flipped. After what seemed like an age the clipped tones of the Marine returned to the comm. External comms have been opened, xenogen, it said. Now see for yourself.

A few lights on the bridges wall screens flickered. Green icons began to appear on the display schematic of the *Enduring Blade*. The Korui at the comms turned in his seat.

We have contact, Shaso At least two cadres of line warriors still active aboard the vessel.

OUdas nodded, turning to Lusha. He still lurked with a thoughtful expression at the rear of the bridge.

Shasel? A name, please. Someone reliable.

The grizzled tau responded without hesitation. LaKais. Contact LaKais.

Ah yes, the hero He nodded at the korui. Open a channel to LaKais.

The bridge systems chimed. The anxious personnel gathered held their collective breath and stared at the innocuous speaker drones.

Shasla? Udas said.

W-what? the return signal was weak, made tinny by the distance and distortion it faced. Udas thought the voice sounded drained. Tired. Traumatized. Hysterical, even. Whose that? it quailed. Who oh I thought the contact was down. Wh?

This is Shaso Sacea Udas, LaKais. I'm aboard the *Enduring Blade*.

Thank the tauva oh, bloodfire thought I was alone

Udas exchanged a raised-eyebrow glance with ElLusha.

Kais I need a status report. Have you seen the Aunel?

Gone gone, by the path eaten up by the blood door Its the terror. The terror, Shaso. Do you hear me? Its the terror! The excess of emotion was palpable in his voice, breaking through the facade of dignity and calmness inherent to taukind. Udas placed a hand over the drone hovering at his side, covering the microphone array. He turned back to ElLusha. Hes gone mad.

Lusha didnt look convinced. Shaso May I?

Of course. Udas waved the drone towards the veteran.

Kais? Kais this is ElLusha.

ElLusha? I blew the engines. I did that. For the machine, Shasel. I cleared the bridge. M-me. That was right, wasnt it? For the machine, you said.

The voice sounded like an infant, timid and querulous, clinging to certainties to displace whatever madness was gripping it. OUdas thought: iurtaemont. Burnout. War madness. Shellshock. It happened.

ElLusha, concern etched on his face, spoke with a soothing cadence. Thats it, child, for the machine Kais: listen to me I want you to tell me whats going on in there. I want you to tell me whats happened to the Aun.

The response was a long time coming. Nervous koruis exchanged worried glances. Udas rubbed his chin.

When it came, the voice was little more than a whisper.

Kais? Kais, we cant hear you.

M-m

Kais?

Montau!

The bridge filled with the murmured litanies and meditations of dozens of personnel, all warding off the connotations of Kaiss pronouncement. OUdas ground his teeth together and shook his head. The youth had lost his mind.

There are things the comm said, voice growing in strength. They came out of the walls, they came out of thin air. I thought it was a trick at first but oh the blood

Kais

Black. Black things. And red. Like devils. Like Montau devils with their eyes on fire and their guns oh

One or two of the koruis moaned quietly, terrified by the monotone description. Lusha tried again.

Kais, thats enough

They took the ethereal. And a guela, I think.

Took them whe

But its okay. Its all fine now, because because, you see, I know. I

understand. Its a nightmare. ElLusha? Im dreaming, arent I? This isnt real

Udas thought ElLusha looked sick, grizzled features closing in on themselves.

Kais, you Youre awake.

and you hah the voice sounded sleepy, fogged behind a cloud of unreality, youre just part of the dream

Kais

Theres something coming.

Kais? Kais, you have to fight th

I have to go now. Respect and Unity, taufann.

Kais!

Silence hit the bridge like a weapon strike, shaking every tau to his or her foundation. The korui at the comm swallowed and shook his head. ElLusha deflated, face pale.

Well, mumbled OUdas, not sure what else to say. well

The guela is hailing us again, Shaso.

Right. Yes. Open the channel.

Click.

ill there? Xeno?

I am here, guela. We

You contacted one of your units, yes? I take it that I have earned your trust?

Perhaps

Good. No attacks on the *Enduring Blade*. Not yet, at any rate.

You say the Aun is on the planet?

I said probably.

Udas could hear gunfire and shouting voices across the comm. He swallowed, hardening his resolve. Then we shall free him.

You are welcome to try, xenogen. This ship is overrun. Im taking my men planetside as soon as I can; we shall clean this mess or die trying.

Commendable br

I neither expect nor desire your commendation, alien. I contacted you to suspend hostilities, thats all. Let us not waste time with pleasantries. Your troops will stay out of my way. That is all.

Is this is this a truce, then?

Call it what you want. Youre on borrowed time.

Udas felt the blood heat again. These were words he understood; military, fighting words. The desire to rise and outstrip the humans arrogant threats was powerful indeed but The Aun must come first. Always.

As you say, human. For now.

The channel went dead, ElLusha clenched his fists, the Koruis cleared their throats and fidgeted in anxiety, and OUdas anticipated another ground war. Suddenly he felt much more at home.

<Tightbeam (multi-direction) commstream generation (0/8.45.h).>
<Carrier-code [Oscillate:54.4>127.22]. Priority-1. (1/630.q) Datastream transmission only.>
<Logging receipt>
<All targets receiving. (1/732.d).>
<ALL FLEET CODE>
<GENERAL HAIL. Suspend comms-traffic for duration.>
<Channels sustained.>
++ All ships, attention.++
++This is the *Enduring Blade*.++
[*Purgatus* here Constantine! What the blazes is going on over there!]
[Sir! *Baleful Gaze*. Youve been out of contact for an hour!]
[*Troubador*Is it the xenos? What action, sir?]
[My telepaths are having fits. One of them clawed his own face off, by the throne! Whats happening?]
++Be silent, all of you. Constantine is gone. Maybe dead.++
[What the devil?]
[Who is th?]
++This is Captain Ardias of the Adeptus Astartes Ultramarines. I want you all to listen very closely.++
[What th?]
++Listen.++
++There has been an incursion. The tau are no longer our priority.++
[I demand an expla]
++No more interruptions!++
++Governor Meyloch Severus of Dolumar IV. Theres a photo ident on the carrier frequency.++
++Hes been tainted.++
[]
[Tainted? What do you mean?]
++You know what I mean.++
++Chaos, gentlemen.++
++The *Enduring Blade* is overrun.++
[This is]
[I mean Living-god]
[Chaos?]

[came out of nowhere]
[How do we know this isnt a tau trick?]
++Oh, of all the ridiculous++
++Hhh++
++Stand by.++
<Carrier-code [Oscillate:54.4>127.22. Stream cont.>
<Secure-code Prompt. Navis Nobilite code requ-----
-----Override.>
<Unknown code entered. Request repe>
<...>
<Subcore priority-code recog. G#3.>
<Standby...>
<SPECIAL CODE ASTARTES/56/GAMMA>
<SEC. PROFILE ALPHA-1.>
<ALL COMMAND OVERRIDE>
<IMPERIAL EDICT M.38.003453>
<SECURE.>
++There. Satisfied?++
[Emperors blood]
[My comms servitor just died!]
[Thrones mercy]
+Ill take that as affirmation.++
++Thats one of the highest priority edict codes youll ever see, gentlemen.
Astartes Prioritus Level. This is real.++
++Im initiating the evacuation of the *Enduring Blade*. I suspect some sort
of Chaos operation on the planet surface. I suggest high-altitude surveys as
soon as possible.++
++Im taking my men down there.++
[I Ill dispatch ground troops immediately.]
[Yes. Yes, me too.]
[A full-scale attack, then. All hands.]
[Agreed.]
++Do what you want. The Ultramarines require no assistance.++
++Stay out of our way.++
[And the tau?]
++Ignore them.++
[What about the *Enduring Blade*?]
++++
[Ardias?]
++On my command, destroy it.++

* * * * *

Kais slipped into insanity. A dec passed.

The first thread of rationality returned to him with the beautiful, ugly thought.

This. This is surrender.

The burstcannon was far more graceful than the blocky meltagun. He vaguely recalled prising it, sticky with blood, from the grasp of a fragmented shasui in the concilium. Its lines were smooth and crafted, its balance perfect. He thumbed the trigger and didn't let go.

This is freedom.

It was a living thing in his hands. A barrelled lance that foamed breathlessly, churning out a strobe-fire-barrage of pulse drops. Like rain, he thought. Like a water stream, filled with iridescent impurities.

This is letting go.

Something went down, screaming. Smoke and sparks clawed at the air, a whalespout of light and vapour. Blood, somewhere. It hit the deck and moaned and shifted, going still, and Kais walked past without looking. Maybe, he thought, it was an enemy. Maybe not.

Maybe it doesn't matter.

This is release.

The thunder barrage of gunfire; the flash lightning drumbeat of contact; electric-blue energy dispersing and dissipating across armour and flesh, gouging liquid metal, splitting muscle and sinew. Something small and chittering exploded with ichor splendour, a damp detonation of black and purple fluids that hung viscously in strands from the surfaces of his gloves and helmet.

A grenade cracked open a black-suited devil like a cockroach, spilling its rotten guts across the floor. It died with its ancient viscera clutched in its claw-gauntleted grasp, trying to reassemble its disordered innards.

Had he killed any tau, rampaging out of control?

Probably. Does it matter?

And the lights. *Yellow-orange-yellow-orange.* Pulse-pulse-pulse.

Portals heaved opened and closed, like heart valves, he thought. Organic machinery inside a stomach vessel, digestive enzymes with boiling red eyes and roaring axes hungrily breaking down the daily intake.

Dead tau, everywhere. Dead guela, everywhere.

Dead fire warriors and guardsmen and Space Marines. Dead officers and sergeants, dead ratings and crewmen and engineers and tech-priests.

Dead everything.

Scattered and blasted. Hanging from walls and ceiling. Bulkheads painted red. Decks awash in cyan. A here-and-there abattoir. *Bits.*

The madness lasted a solid dec, at least. His mind closed up: ephemeral thoughts passing through, peripheral considerations and concerns lost in a barrage of violence and blood. A whirligig storm of horror. The Montau thing slithered its way into his brain and took over.

Took over or set him free? He wasn't sure.

At the end of it, running through the circular platforms of the evacuation shaft, he began to remember details: little things first, but growing in size and relevance. A single dec. One point five human hours. So little time and yet so many memories crammed-together, slowly uncoiling.

There had been a voice in his head. There had been commands, perhaps. An impatient growl in his mind describing routes and pathways, opening doors and slamming them shut, warning him of the black hulk terrors lurking in wait for him. It was uncanny. The voice called him xeno and sounded angry. It spoke in the guela language.

He wondered why his madness should take such a precise form.

The voice had said that theywhoever they were had struggled with the tau communication frequencies. It said he should consider himself lucky. The voice said that thanks to the Grace of the Emperor, they'd been able to latch on to his helmet code to reach him.

Kais didn't understand, of course, but reasoned that one wasn't, perhaps, supposed to understand hallucinations. The voice had said things were dire. The voice said if the enemy succeeded in firing the ship's weapons into the tau fleet, then truce or not the war would begin again. The voice said someone had to cripple the lance arrays.

Kais's memories were soup. They curled and coiled and writhed away from him, borne aloft on a bed of yammering, yowling voices; of whispering evil in his ear. Still, he remembered the guns. The voice talked him through it, thank the path. He concentrated on killing and dousing the world in blood whilst his madness his patient, human-speaking madness crackled in his helmet and told him how to plant bombs in file-edged ammunition stores and run, run, run.

He remembered the explosions. And now what?

This. This is release!

He thumbed the trigger again, pressure pad tacky with half-dry blood. There was almost no recoil and he delighted in the churning stream of teardrop plasma, biting and gnawing through the smoke and haze that seemed to have filled every last corner of this infectious, ruined ship.

Yes, maybe things were getting clearer. A dec had passed, or thereabouts, and now the mindfog was diminishing. He remembered the munitions

chambers exploding, the voice in his head reluctantly congratulating him, the panicked screams

He remembered a cold, grating voice pumped through every corridor like oxygen from a vent, hissing: All hands, evacuate vessel. All hands, evacua

And the voice had said, Get to the drop pods, xeno, if you can.

And the voice had gone.

He remembered following the crowds. Humans and tau avoiding eye contact, fighting together but never speaking, descending through the ship together but never touching, never tapping one another on the back or helping one another when wounded. The guela ran and shouted and screamed and died. The tau hurried in silence, fanned out efficiently, exchanged commands, kept their cool and died just the same.

And they all steered clear of him. It was like it was like they werent sure who or what he was. He remembered that hed tried, twice, to comm-link with the hurrying tau troops. Perhaps his helmet was more damaged than he thought, because not one deigned to answer.

The Montau thing was out of him now, draped like a shroud, like wings, like a bloody black mantle. He remembered rust-red Marines howling and bellowing, oozing from walls and floors with impossible spontaneity, hacking off heads and disappearing in a wet slurp of warp immateria. He remembered the hissing, whispering evil that saturated the air flexing and growing, biting at his madness, inviting him to join it.

A dec had passed, more or less. There was clarity returning now, by degrees. He wondered why. Was it, perhaps, desperation?

There were no drop pods. The evac-bay was a great circular abyss, platforms on all sides ringed by drop pod archways, level after level of evacuation galleries overflowing with panicking individuals struggling for freedom. Fights broke out, of course.

Briefly he toyed with turning back, returning to the snaking corridors and slime pocked cloisters of the ship. Giving in to it would be so easy, so perfect; clutching in his hand a weapon, unburdened by fears and agendas. No objectives. No commands. No rationality. No focus. Just total surrender, smashing and breaking and shattering. Pouring himself out of himself, destroying for the sake of destroying, raging impotently against the bitterness inside.

See, father? *See!*

But It was too easy. Too pointless. So he went down a level, and down again, and each time the madness cleared a little more. Something was jostling it in his brain, pushing aside the need to kill. Something much older than the rage, something stronger even than the Montau hunger.

Survival. The need to stay alive. Oh, maybe surviving to one day fight

again. Maybe to achieve great and noble things. Maybe to live out his days in solitude and silence, pondering upon everything and nothing. There was no why to it. It didnt matter what reason he gave himself for staying alive; the need to do so was all that mattered.

So a dec, more or less, passed. The insanity went away, piece by piece. He killed and fought and struggled. He descended past drop pods tumbling away into the void with guela or tau (but never both) cargo. He limped on a bloody, rotten leg, shut out the whispering madness in his skull and finally, mercifully-Clarity returned to him. Words from nowhere:

No expansion without equilibrium. No conquest without control. Pursue success in serenity And service to the tauva.

Shasla Tau Kais took a breath and shrugged off the horror. There was an unlaunched drop pod at the base of the shaft. He took a second, closing his eyes and allowing himself to reach equilibrium. He almost, almost managed it.

He was interrupted. Someone, nearby, shrieked.

The Blademaster Tikoloshe was mad. He knew it.

He concentrated and somewhere deep in his fractured, buzzing consciousness a command was dispatched. Ancient, rust-corrupted servos growled, tangled power cords tightening brutally.

His legs moved, a creaking werewolf cackle of protesting, unoiled joints and unnatural ossified growths shattering and grinding against one another.

His mind rolled over and lost itself, briefly.

Three thousand years ago: On an unnamed desertworld claimed by the Daemonlord Tarkhax he roars in silence, grappling his razor-talons against the shimmering wraith sword of a fiery Eldar monstrosity, its blazing eyes roaring with endless smoke

The links of his upper left limb locked briefly, too long out of service. He snarled without making a sound and overpowered the motors, shattering whatever desiccated impediment blocked their progress and venting a stinking serpent of purple-blue smoke.

His thirteenth birthday, on far Cthonia: The Mountain Angels in their shining armour choose him above all others and take him away to their Summit fortress. In seven years he will be a Space Marine-@@ Light caught at the blades of his limbs in a wave of flashing reflection, a thousand razor edges to slice and de-tendon any unprotected meat. They pockmarked his shell like fish scales; ancient gobbets of carved flesh crumbling away in powdery

necrosis.

Six thousand years ago: He awakes from centuries of blood-dream slumber to answer the call of Gilgalash the Carnator. For a century the hiveworlds surrounding the Kreel Nebula face the Black Crusade of Sicklefell. Before it is sundered, thirty-three worlds will be systematically murdered, one by one by one

And the claws ahh, the claws. Unoiled, untended, untreated by cunning artifice or ridiculous machine-god acquiescence. Their razor edges were maintained by a higher power, and they slid with a sorcerous glow from his vast energy-venting forelimb, emerging with a silken *rasp* that curled his dead features into a skeletal smile.

Ten thousand years ago: Terra. The great betrayal. Ripping apart the palace in unquenchable fury, hacking at every horrified loyalist that dared face him. Even then, before his internment, he preferred the slow, dragging edge of a blade to the inelegant thunder of a gun

* * * * *

Some of his circuitry was fused, delicate tech abused and twisted by the centuries of heresy. He flicked through optical sensors hungrily, seeking prey, ignoring the shattered or flimsy niters that rendered him blind and focusing on the glowing points of light that meant: *Enemy*.

Back to his youth: Techs chant and pray and push their instruments into his brain, preparing him for the final biological manipulation before his graduation as a Marine. His mind is a hypnotically sealed crypt of Dogma and Imperial worship. This will change

The machine tomb responded to his commands with growing success. The movement of its limbs became familiar once more, insanity applied crudely to sensitive thought stimuli, manipulating and articulating its extremities. Limbs and life support filters squealed in protest and again his dead lips, locked deep in the machines black core, curled in a sneer.

The first change hed made to the dreadnought Skaarflax, all those millennia ago, had been to rip out its pain centres.

Back to the crusade: He murders sixteen of the false-Emperors Space Marines in a single day and witnesses firsthand the fiery cataclysm that claims

Forgeworld Barnassus. Mortally wounded in the bloodswamps of IYcklahl, his internment is ordered by the Carnator himself within the Dreadnought-hulk *Skaarflax*. Its previous incumbent is torn from its guts before his eyes, atrophied muscles spasming, left to shriek and ooze its fluids from ruptured connectors into the scarlet marshes

* * * * *

He took stock of his situation, finally convinced of his readiness. The warp portal had delivered him onto a gunmetal deck at the base of a tall circular abyss, O-shaped gantries rising up in successive levels above him. He watched scurrying meat-things run and shout and fight in three different spectrums, the basso roar of launching drop pods a constant background growl.

There would be much killing here. Yes.

Back to Terra: The defeat. The flight. The thirst for vengeance. Ten thousand years of rage and anger and bitterness. His fury could drive a dynamo

They came at him in a gaggle not even watching where they were going, too absorbed in the task of finding an evacuation craft. Two were locked in a running argument, shouting inconsequential rubbish in their inconsequential patois, waving their inconsequential weapons and making inconsequential threats. If they saw him at all from the corner of their eyes, perhaps they mistook him for a heap of piled crates. Cargo. Certainly not alive.

He timed himself, just for fun. It took him 4.78 seconds to remove their legs, at the hip. By 6.34 seconds only one of them had any hands left, and both were shorn of fingers opposable thumbs wriggling like lonely maggots. By eight seconds on the dot they were mewling, dying, shellshocked mannequins, limbs detached, heads flexing and twisting in splattershriek pain. He could have beheaded them at any moment.

He left them to roll on the deck. It was more fun that way.

* * * * *

Back to the desert-world: Back to the eldar avatar, roaring and hissing and spitting its ember rage. Somethings wrong and the Chaos warhost knows it. Theres something in the air: a sound, perhaps, just beyond perception. The Daemonlord Tarkhax roars so loud that the skies go black and the Marines nearest to its vast hostbody clutch at their heads, and everything

Everything vanishes

The memory made him stop and flex his claws hungrily. Three thousand years of imprisonment was a scar worn heavily on his blistered, cancerous soul.

No more reminiscing, he decided, just as someone shot him.

Bright blue droplets rattled ineffectually on his chassis, lightning storm phosphorescence giving the circular chamber a ghastly strobelit animation. There was no pain. No damage, beyond a few more sooty chrysanthemums of plasma impact to be worn proudly on the dreadnoughts plating. Medals of honour, almost.

If he could have laughed, he would have.

The gun chattered again, as impotent as drizzle against a steel sheet. He raised his talons and flexed them slowly, one by one, letting the velvet remark of each metal-on-metal hiss echo softly around the room. The enemy was a white heat ghost in his eyes.

He rushed forwards in a storm of clattering footsteps and snick-snacking knives, reaching out in a lovers embrace to welcome the petulant little creature to its end. Moments before the mantis claws closed on their prey, the figure bounded up the curling ramp to the next mezzanine level, sidestepping clumsily. The Blade-masters talons lacerated the steel guide rail in a flurry of tube sections and hot-edged piping, leaving him roaring silently inside his mechanical tomb.

The Skaarflax was rotated elegantly towards the ramp, stepping forwards and upwards in a succession of deck-gouging clawsteps. Tikoloshe was in no mood to play cat and mouse.

He spoke to himself as he chased, words silent within his mind. I will catch you and dejoint you, little thing, he promised. Ill make boneless flesh sacks of your torso and cut out each eye, each ear, each fluid and gristle lump of offal in your guts before I let you die.

The figure scrabbled away from its hulking pursuer, rolling a grenade down the ramp. The Blademaster stamped on the bauble nonchalantly and barely even wobbled when it detonated beneath his ablative feet. He stalked onwards, implacable.

Like waves of goosebumps rising in shivery anticipation, the tiny blades covering every centimetre of the dreadnoughts chassis stood upright hungrily. In his mind, Tikoloshe saw giblet filth covering every planet, checkerboard slices on every skin surface. Hed eviscerate the world, dismember the galaxy, slice the universe! He reached the top of the ramp and swivelled again, following his prey.

The figure was hurt, he saw, limping badly on a wounded leg that left a spatter trail of white heat on his vision. It paused against a rail, slumping breathlessly, chest gulping for air. The Blademaster upped the sensitivity of

Skaarflaxs audio sensors, perversely keen to hear the figures burning lungs pumping and heaving.

It was a dry rattle. A wondrous melody. Music to murder by.

He spread his upper limbs to their full span, mantis claws extended like flesh cleaving wings. And he charged.

It was the simplest thing in the world.

Breathe deep. Groan.

Kais put his weight on his good leg, exaggerating the feeble uselessness of the wounded one.

He craned his neck and gasped for air he didnt need.

Youre exhausted, he told himself. Youre in pain. Youre ready to give up and youre shaking. Yes, thats it. Youre shaking in fear and madness.

And the monster charged.

Like a rampaging grazebeast. It pawed at the ground, articulated at its hips, displayed its glittering galaxy of knifeclaws and hurtled towards him. Every footstep shook the world.

He didnt know what it was. Didnt care. It was an obscenity: a hulking corruption of the Machine his father spoke of.

Its claws scissored against each other icily, grinding and hissing.

Not yet.

Highlights shimmered across it in waves, oscillating emergency lights distorted and shattered by each and every cutting edge.

Not yet

Its spine-encrusted shoulders, vast chassis collar rolling and pistoning furiously, gouted a thick miasma of smoke and spent fuel.

Not yet!

Snick-snack-snick!

He dived aside and rolled and rolled and rolled.

Something slashed at his back distantly, slicing across his pack and flipping him over. It was a knife-tip cut, just beyond the metal monsters reach, spilling ration packs and ammunition clips across the deck. The beast was moving too fast. It swivelled to follow his sideways movement, motors growling in protest, but it was too late. Its legs kicked effortlessly through the mezzanine-railing and for a second, for a perfect moment of stillness, it hung in the air over the drop to the deck below.

Then it was gone.

When it landed it cracked open like an egg, and when Kais examined the withered thing inside he thought of aborted reptiles and blind, nourishment-starved clonebeasts. It hissed a final protracted breath and was dead.

Was this Montau too? A facade of brutality, a sham-devil with razor flesh and bloody claws, concealing within itself a shrivelled thing no more deadly than a corpse. There were too many thoughts in his head, con-flirting and battering one another. A Brownian motion of consequence and consideration, fighting for dominance.

Weary with confusion, exhaustion hanging from every muscle and bone, Kais slumped into the one remaining drop pod and stabbed at the launch trigger.

He slept the whole way down.

VI

16.12 HRS (SYS. LOCAL DOLUMAR IV, Ultima Seg. #4356/E)

The man in the dark place faced his captives and wet his lips. One of them moaned quietly, chains clinking in the gloom. The man took a deep breath, allowing a predatory smile to spread across his face, and began.

Now be quiet and pay attention, please. I wont repeat myself and, lets be clear about this, one way or another you will listen to me. We can do this the easy way or the *other* way. The choice is yours, gentlemen.

Admiral? Do stop struggling. Youll miss the good parts.

Now Where to begin? This is a story, I suppose, so one rather feels the need for a Grand Opening

The man stroked at his immaculately sculpted beard thoughtfully. People, he said, with something akin to disgust in his voice, have skewed views on what makes a story. They forget that everything we do, every day, every second of our small little lives, is part of a storys middle; its guts, if you like. Youre born, you do things, you die. Wheres the beginning? Or the end? Its never as simple as it seems.

Oh, for warps sake Aun! If you dont stop fiddling with those chains Ill have your hands removed. Youre putting me off.

He shook his head, exasperated, and began again.

There was a beginning two days ago, when I captured a high-ranking tau ethereal on behalf of the Imperium. There was a beginning when I contacted Fleet Admiral Constantine to request a squad of specialist troops for that very job. There was a beginning, oh yes, twenty-three years ago when I arrived on Dolumar IV. It hasnt changed much, this world. Did you know that? Oh, we built the odd factory, the occasional town, that sort of thing. But its whats underneath that counts.

There was a beginning twenty-one years ago, when Magos-explorer Carneg visited me after a routine survey of the eastern mountains. But thats a boring beginning and besides the tedious little man is, Im sorry to say, no longer with us. So, we can go further back than that.

There was a beginning, of sorts, in the thirty-first millennium when the Imperium rolled on its belly and realised it had been rotting from inside for years. The Horus Heresy blossomed and caught everyone off guard. Poor little creatures He grinned, envisioning the horror and shock that had spread across the galaxy like wildfire.

Of course your species, Aun, back then, was lurking in a puddle of primordial ooze. Perhaps Perhaps things would have gone better for you if youd stayed there.

But, listen. Theres another beginning. Just over three thousand years ago. The tyrannids have not yet reached the galaxy, the orks are busy infesting the Straits of Halk and the tau well. Maybe just maybe theyd mastered the art of simple tools by then. In any case, the eastern fringes were ripe for the taking.

There was an army. A *Chaos* army

The admiral began to thrash and groan, voice muffled behind the gag in his mouth. His face was twisted with revulsion and terror. Severus fixed him with a stare and shook his head.

Come now, Constantine. You shouldnt be so quick to judge. Closing your mind is the first step to mundanity, and we cant have that, can we?

Now this warhost This tide of black death, this this *Chaos Undivided* It dragged a net of nightmares across the sector. It toppled a dozen systems, murdered a hundred planets. It spread the Dark Word throughout the Segmentum and doused a hundred cities in blood and plague and stink. It knocked down temples, laughed at the sanctity of Imperial shrines, built statues out of bone and pieces of meat How does the ancient hymn go? Mere Anarchy is loosed upon the world. Yes, thats it. Then it reached Dolumar IV.

Imagine the sight! Black clouds on every horizon! A million shrieking daemon things filling the skies. Drums! Oh, the drums! There were humans, even here. Some forgotten colony, lost since the Age of Apostasy or before, it doesnt matter. They lasted all of five minutes.

The warhost ordered their slaves to begin the excavation of a great pit; a Temple Abyss to collect and focus the energies of their Dark Lords. This pit, in fact. Oh yes: its still here, all these millennia later. Explorator Carneg stumbled upon the capstone shortly before his ah accident. Isnt it beautiful?

He spread wide his arms and gloried in the cool darkness of the vast pit, sunlight little more than a distant memory at the top of the shaft.

To cut a long story short, he smiled, locking eyes with the deadpan ethereal, they summoned a daemon. Its name oh, admiral, shut up! its name was Tarkhax. Beneath the daemonlords dominion the warhost went on to greater obscenities, greater carnage, greater Chaos. Nothing could stand against them, and anyone idiotic enough to try was crushed underfoot.

Whats all this got to do with us? Thats what youre wondering. Oh, dont worry, Aun: all will become clear.

Heres the thing. Just when Tarkhax was at the height of his power, when all the filth of the galaxy was drawn to his banner, when a Black Crusade into the Segmentum Solar seemed unavoidable, the eldar got involved.

Oh, dont ask me how or why. Maybe some broad-minded Imperium fop

decided that consorting with aliens has benefits over total annihilation. Ironical, wouldn't you say, how history repeats itself? One way or another the Eldar came to Dolmar and began to cause difficulties. They are a shrewd breed; cunning in the extreme and impossible to predict. They harried the warhost and vanished, popping up in strange places. Like ghosts.

It turns out and it took me three years of borrowing xenolinguist servitors to unravel this that the Eldar established quickly that their hopes of annihilating Tarkhan and his forces were scant. They opted instead for a sly solution.

The cartouche they left behind them explains it all, though deciphering its mysteries has cost me much of my life and my fortune. They opened up a sealed pocket of warp-space part of a webway, the text says. We can't even begin to fathom its workings but I like to think of it as a cage, outside of space and time, cut off even from the warp. They closed off all the exits, detached it from their network of warp tunnels and sealed the gateways behind them.

The mightiest of their warlocks, commanded by the Farseer Jur Telissa, constructed a songweave like a psychic melody, holding it together, stitching the prison closed piece by piece. Out on the plains Tarkhan was moments from crushing their forces when the spell was finished and HhA-and every last unit, every daemon and Marine, every warp thing and every warrior in that glorious army disappeared. The pennants and icons fell. The black heraldry was left to rot, vehicles burning in the deserts. A grim day for the powers in the warp.

The effort killed almost all the Eldar warlocks. Small comfort.

His lip curled, the unquenchable agonies of his master wracking through his body, filling him with despair.

Imagine, he hissed, the sensation too much to bear, being sealed away for three thousand years, unable to move or think or feel. Cut off from the rage and the power of your gods. Separated by impossible energies from the howling, insane fury of your daemonlord. His cage was the strongest of all.

It took me three years to discern what those meddling, arrogant xenogen warlocks had done. It has taken me sixteen to work out how to undo it but I'm close. Oh, terrors-face, so close! All but one of the prisons are sundered. The army is released. Praise be the Ruinous Ones! Oh, stories can get away with not having a real beginning, gentlemen, but there's always an ending.

Don't look at me with those disgusted eyes, admiral. You don't know. You haven't seen what I've seen. Your Your order, your structure it's *transient*. It crumbles. I understand. Given enough time, even the mightiest of endeavours comes to dust. Disorder out of order. You can't fight nature. And everyone, in their secret souls, knows it. My masters merely seek to speed the process.

It took me a decade. Hard years of rites and incantations, secretly studied and recited, chipping away at the songweave, crumbling the walls of the prison little by little. And then this this diplomatic disagreement. My crowning glory an orchestrated war. A thousand casualties, and more, all in the name of the daemon-lord! The governor breathed hard, heart hammering excitedly in his chest. He forced himself to regain his composure and lit a bac-stick from his pocket, inhaling the scented fumes thoughtfully.

There are rules, you see. He blew a greasy smoke ring, enjoying the ethereals undivided attention on his every movement. Oh, you stand and chant, you render the dispel icons and arrange the non-weave perfectly. You strike at the monoliths with deconsecrated swords and smear plagueshit across the altars but you still need a gesture. Sorcery has a high cost, gentlemen. Its paid in blood and souls and hate.

Thanks to your little conflict, thanks to all those tau killed by human hands and vice versa more than enough blood was spilled to fuel the final little act. The walls came tumbling down. I set the army free.

Let me spell it out to you. I ordered your abduction because I expected reprisals, Aun, not because I value whatever worthless shreds of knowledge you have. I have to admit, mind you, the severity of the counterattack was impressive. Perhaps the tau arent entirely useless to the Dark Powers after all. And admiral Admiral, admiral, admiral. Oh you poor, deluded thing. You really think you had any autonomy throughout this? You think you exercised free choice? I summoned you here, I involved you, stoked up the fire I even crawled into a librarians mind, just to persuade that pompous fool Ardias to intervene. A delightful little peace conference was the only way I could get you both in the same room. All terribly sneaky, dont you think?

So the warhost was freed. The webway spat them out like rotten meat wherever I commanded, of course and now theyre up there on the surface, flexing their muscles. Theyve been waiting for three thousand years. It would be rude not to allow them some ha venting time.

I couldnt have done it without you. You both have my deepest gratitude. Still. No rest for the wicked, as they say. I have one little job left and then this whole sordid business is done with. One last seal to break. It has to be at sundown, gentlemen. Nineteen minutes past seven pm, by Dolumars clock. I checked. Thats three hours from now. Three hours until the last prison crumbles. Three hours until almighty Tarkhax Tarkhax the Barbarous; Tarkhax the Iniquitor; Tarkhax the Defiler! rises again to finish his holy work Three hours until all of us we whove done more than any others to bring about the daemonlords release are rewarded for our faith.

Dont look so scared, admiral. You might even enjoy it.

The servitor twitched briefly and turned its baleful gaze upon Captain Brunt. The bearded man, legs long since atrophied away to nothingness by years of seated command, mentally swivelled his chair cocoon towards the skeletal creature.

Message, captain, it clicked, cable bundles swaying as it moved.

From?

Ardias. Space Marine. Very patchy.

Play it.

Ghoulishly, the servitors dry lips moved in time with the relayed message, sharp voice suddenly dampened and bullied into Ardiass gruff tones.

hear this, Fleet ant wait any longe tramarines will evacuate in thirty secon o more delays. No merc eel no remorse at this, the vesseonger part of the God-Emperors flee tterly corrupted. It must be destroyed

The servitors mouth snapped shut with a dry crack and it turned back to its console. Brunt arched an eyebrow. On the viewscreen at the apex of the hot, dry bridge, the *Enduring Blade* hung enormously in the void. Its ruined generarium vented white hot promethium fuel in a ghostly trail as it lurched slowly, carcass prow splintered and battered, broadside weapons batteries reduced to gaping, toothless maws. More disturbing still, over the past hour an unnatural patina had begun to form across those obsidian faces of the hulk left undamaged; a green/red corrosion that matted every gloss, sullyng every bright icon and gargoyle, wrapping threadlike pseudopodia of rust and mould and decay around it: strangling tendrils dragging its prey out of the light.

Brunt was put in mind of a tumour, breaking free of its initial lodging and spreading its cancerous cells throughout every network of fluids and flesh, grasping blindly, twisting and perverting and corrupting. Spatter clouds of sparks and minor detonations marred the crevices striating the broad hull, the corridor viscera within black and fluid with whatever ruinous sorcery was morphing and infecting the ship exposed like withered intestines.

He almost spat. The revulsion at seeing a vessel of the *Enduring Blades* ancient calibre a beacon of purity and strength that had served the Emperor unstintingly for millennia so corrupted and mired in evil, so defeated and violated, so utterly ruined it was more than he was prepared to tolerate.

There were innocents still aboard. Hiding in their cabins, lurking in gloom-filled dormitories, shrieking and screaming as the last drop pods fell away without them and the Marines, their last vestige of hope, boarded their strikehawk and deserted them.

Brunt thought: Better off dead.

Officer Jarreth. Prime the starboard arrays. Bring us into position. Contact the fleet. Tell them

Tell them the *Purgatus* claims this lamentable duty as its own. Tell them

to get clear.

Kais slept. Dreamless and black. A sleep of exhaustion and confusion.

Unable to resolve himself, unable to discern his thoughts into some precise mental colloid of reality and absurdity, his brain took the only option open to it.

It shut down. It closed itself off from everything. It threw up walls of weariness, pulled the plug on consciousness and aborted for the time that it took to reset. To start again.

Total. Mental. Expurgation.

His father had spoken of machines. *The machine*. A machine that, refusing to operate and unable to diagnose its errors, will nonetheless maintain every outward appearance of efficiency after simply closing down and being switched back on again. But the error would remain. Secret and impossible to reach. No matter how many times the machine required restarting, reformatting refreshing it would continue to falter until the problem was tackled at its root.

Outside of his mind a recorded servitor voice announced calmly that the drop pod had just punctured the mesosphere. Crude target seeking arrays, in the absence of any user input coordinates, identified a major population/energy reading within the troposphere, probably surface-based, and adjusted its descent to accommodate. A klaxon trilled once, almost perfunctory in its lacklustre volume, and the servitor voice reminded its occupants to batten down any cargo and ensure that all vehicular freight was adequately secured. Human passengers, it droned, were advised to check the straps of their deployment booths.

Kais rolled over in his sleep, flaccid muscles sprawled liquidly across the deck, and dreamed of cool, dark nothingness.

Korvesa 66.G#77 (Orbsat Surveillance) gusted horizontally in relation to the planets terminator to optimise its view of the guela vessel. The two fleets skulked on either side of the crippled hulk, weapons visibly lowered but not unlimbered. The drone drank it all in, recording and surveying, hungry for data.

Drop pods left the guela fleet like rain. Sunlight transformed them into pined fish shoals, iridescent flanks sweeping in broad waves of shimmering motion. The planetary exosphere took on a dappled ruby glow as pod after pod sluiced through its boundaries in a riot of superheated matter and coiling gases, the onset of evening marked brutally by the crescent swathe of darkness gobbling up continents below.

Orbsat 66.G could sense the abundance of weapons descending towards

the surface. Munitions, artillery, vehicles: all deployed in a succession of different sized pods and shuttles, dipping their armoured bases and plummeting daggerlike, swallowed by perspective within moments.

The tau flotilla, positioned carefully opposite its black-hulled counterparts, efficiently disgorged a growing swarm of dropships. Soaring gulls to the humans graceless divehawks, they descended in progressive V-shaped waves, flanked by Barracuda fighters and drone-operated Harpedoes. Orbsat 66.G tracked a Dorsal-class heavy bomber as it rolled into the ionosphere in a gust of blue energy and was gone.

On either side of the tiny drone, waterfalls of death tumbled planetwards, and spinning with morbid ungainliness in the space in between, the mouldering cadaver of the *Enduring Blade* turned prow over stern and vented oxygen into the void. One of the guela vessels moved forwards, a ponderous monstrosity letting the last of its brood eggs tumble away to the spawning ground below. It was sleeker than the *Enduring Blade*, spire-encrusted plate surfaces more streamlined, arrowhead beak longer and more vicious. The drones vast memory banks hurried to identify the vessel, rapidly narrowing its list of candidates as each unique feature of the ebony black facade-hull was checked off against intelligence reports and sightings.

The *Purgatus*, the assessment reported, noting an elaborate array of cannon lances protruding from the vessels flanks and an ancient battle scar on the uppermost toroq spires clearly repaired with more recent metallurgical techniques: telltale identifying marks, like pectoral wounds on an alpha tpel shark. Retribution class, the report said. Impossibly ancient. Impossibly powerful.

Growing energy emissions from the swollen gun ports sent 66.G into a flurry of confirmations and warnings tightbeamed to the *Ores Tashvar*. The response was dismissive: Continue surveillance. No further action. Negligible threat detected.

The *Purgatus* adopted a flanking position alongside the tumbling *Enduring Blade*, engines and stabilisers carefully fired in a succession of small bursts until the ships moved in the same slow pirouette together, a single unit bonded by invisible cords. The lance clusters developed a ruddy glow, faint deck lights surrounding their positions dimming even further as power was brutally redistributed. A corona began to form, a shifting zone of arcing electricity and vacuum-guzzled gases.

Orbsat 66.G sensed the energyspike in a sub-real spectrum moments before the weapons fired. In a flurry of glow-tipped torpedoes deployed from peripheral launch bays, the central cannon belched a solid stream of plasma-energy, secondary and tertiary weapons-fire clustered around its core like tributaries.

The first shot sliced open the *Enduring Blade* like a warm slab of poiseil, melting its structure with colossal precision. Explosions and abortive mushroom-cloud gouts of superheated air marred the edges of the incision dwarfed by the scale of the scene and rendered insignificant; little more than sparks at the tip of a hammer-struck anvil.

A wedge of decking yawned open from the dying vessel, exposing a labyrinth of cross-section corridors and machinery within. The dark aura that clung to the ship totally escaping the drones abilities of analysis but somehow tangible nonetheless was dragged out into the void to dissipate harmlessly.

The second strike, as the *Enduring Blade* rolled serenely end over tip, punctured the cavernous wreckage of the engine stacks and punched a mighty bolt hole the length of the carcass a blazing lance that glowed through the portholes and gaps in the infrastructure and knocked a solid chunk of the wedge prow into razor-shrapnel; an exit wound full of fire and zero-gravity liquid metal, tumbling and accreting.

The ship rolled again, displaying the devastation of the first shot like a proud veteran dragging tight the skin around his flesh wounds to exaggerate his scars of honour. The third shot, accompanied by a precision-targeted swarm of torpedoes, stabbed deep into the wound and, the watching drone surmised, dissected a promethium fuel line.

For a single raikan there was light: a nova flash bright enough to leave an ugly overexposed mishmash of pixels across 66.Gs conventional-spectrum recording and casting a freeze frame shadow, grotesque and crenellated, across the *Purgatuss* hull.

Then, chain reactions dispersing along the length of the vessel in both directions, the *Enduring Blade* shrugged off its skin, scattered its rotten musculature like chaff, gurgled coils of white-hot fuel nervously, and finally ghoulishly vanished behind a domino effect detonation that pulverised every connection, shattered every joist and bulkhead, atomised every datalink and evaporated the aborted screams of anyone unfortunate enough to still be alive.

Orbsat 66.G watched detached as the lifesign counter dropped like a stone. The carcass broke up. Cable guts shimmied in the sun and fragmented. Melt-blasted debris formed gunmetal confetti, expanding spherically. And bodies. Bodies and bodies and bodies.

A motion detector set high on the drones casing diverted its attention briefly. It oscillated precisely and trained its primary optic on the guela fleet, brooding darkly against the planetary eventide, suffering the hail of fragments from their violated brother in some self-flagellating display of sorrow.

On every beaked monster, on every sombre battleship and snarl-prowed frigate, every colossal battlecruiser, a mast was jerkily raised above the

bridgecastle. The fleet flew a black flag and the Imperial comm-channels were thick with the tinny report of funereal marches and martial fugues.

Things came back to him in a jumble.

Vision, somewhere. The wince-inducing flare of first light followed quickly by a moments confusion: perspective was all wrong focusing on distant objects didnt work.

Helmet-HUD, he reminded himself. Focus close.

The drop pod door lay open at an angle, the rich evening sky of Dolumar revealed beyond. Kais wondered abstractly how long hed been asleep, how long since landing, how long since

The memories came back to him in a glut of impressions and sounds, making him gag. Hed lost control, he knew. Hed been pushed to the very back of his own consciousness and forced to watch, forced to obey.

Thats an excuse.

Nobody forced you.

You. Did. It. Yourself.

He stamped on that thought quickly and bullied his attention onto less esoteric matters, peering down at his gloves. He was unsurprised to find the familiar black-brown crust of dried blood speckling each digit, and again looked away before the reality could seep into his thoughts. He shifted his concentration to the blinking icons bordering his HUD. Half his helmets analysis functions were inoperative, and an experimental grope with his hand revealed a network of dents and scrapes and scratches. Again, he blinked and moved on, exercising the methodical analysis his training had instilled.

His leg ached. Hed lost the medipack that covered it, somewhere. A cursory glance at his pack reminded him of the blade-encrusted vehicle-monster and he shuddered, secretly grateful that hed been under the effects of the madness. In a more rational state of mind, beyond the ravaging effects of exhaustion and the rage, he couldnt have hoped to deal with such an enemy.

Was the Montau to thank, then, for his deliverance?

More rogue thoughts, there. Displacement was the key, he decided. Stay busy. Dont think. He stood up, testing his body, and was astonished to find himself refreshed. He stretched languidly, arching his back and rubbing at his arms, enjoying the feline sensation for its mundane normalcy.

Something loud punctured his comfort from outside the pod. He blinked and ignored the ugly sound, concentrating on himself.

Tapping at a small control on his wrist (mercifully undamaged), a small tube flicked into position alongside his mouth and he sipped gratefully on a high-energy soup of jhal nectar, imagining it spreading through his body like a warm lattice of glowing tendrils. It felt that way.

A well-maintained warrior, he said aloud, not feeling foolish, is an effective warrior. *Siot* meditation twelve, lesson four.

A series of explosions, somewhere nearby, rocked the drop pod lightly like a faint wind. He scowled and put it out of his mind, not prepared to deal with that reality yet.

He picked up the burst cannon, examining its smooth lines. It was pitted and scratched in places, and as he drew a gloved finger along the barrel he was careful to avoid such imperfections, as if by refraining from any contact with the brutality of his memories he might successfully eclipse them. The dull report of distant explosions grew more frequent stuttering gunfire and moaning aircraft engines entering the general background hum.

A single blade of grass, he recited loudly, blocking the sounds of war, will bend and falter in the lightest wind. But where grass grows in pasture, in field or savannah; each blade feels but a fraction of the winds full force. It prospers due to the common purpose of its fe

Xeno? Are you undamaged?

Kais stopped, startled.

The voice had sounded like it came from behind him. He fought the irrational desire to spin on his spot, looking for the speaker. He already knew the pod was empty. He coughed and started again, even louder.

A single blade of gr

Xeno? Xenogen, are you receiving this?

This time the voice was impossible to ignore more clear than previously and full of urgency. It spoke directly into his ear in the *guela* language. He resolved to ignore it.

Guillimans oath, alien! If youre there, answer me!

Who is this? he whispered, cold sweat gathering inside his helmet.

Ah! Youre alive.

Who is this?

What do you mean? Its Ardias, of course.

The memories came tumbling in, and this time he couldnt turn away from them.

At the height of the madness there'd been a voice in his head. This Ardias, he realised. The blue-suited Space Marine, with his grey on grey scarred features, his grizzled frown and his no-nonsense voice, helmetless and scowling. Instructing him how to destroy the weapon stacks, talking him through the worst of the murder rage. Part of his madness, he'd surmised. A *guela* in his ear.

Ardias, he said, trying out the sound of it. For some reason it was hard to visualise anyone other than Lusha at the end of the comm.

Thats right. Whats your status?

Landed. Im on the surface.

Obviously. I meant, whereabouts on the surface? The voice was thick with impatience.

Struggling against the inertia, Kais dragged himself towards the gaping exit of the pod and peered out. The desire to withdraw and wrench closed the door was almost overwhelming.

A Barracuda shrieked overhead, heavy weapons throbbing at the air. Sooty arcs of dust and debris fountained skywards all across the horizon, bulbous mushrooms of flame and red-black smoke rising upwards at their hearts. A guela city spread out before him, crude earthen buildings of angry right angles and flat topped mundanity stretching away into the distance. He recognised certain landmarks here and there the tall steeples of prefabricated chapels, erected by the book to mirror one another exactly. A serried rank of blocky factories and vast hangars cast a long shadow across the district. Somewhere behind him, long since deserted, were the trenchways where the madness had begun.

The drop pods came down like meteors hurled out of space, glowing red hot from the descent. Shrieking out their plummet like a tide of banshees, they ripped from the clouds and pummelled the city. Buildings dissolved to mud and dust, belching their pulverised walls air-wards. Streets were gouged and dented, succumbing to an artillery bombardment that spawned dizzy, shell-shocked passengers, guela and tau alike. They crawled from craters and wreckage groggily, clutching at heads and weapons and each other.

There Ardias voxed. We have a fix on your position. Stay out of the pod it interferes with your communicator.

Kais wasn't listening. He'd seen something.

They came along the street like walking tumours. Armour articulating fluidly, dragging chains and horsehair capes behind them, ugly weapons chattering and crooning into the devastation. One of them had daubed seven-pointed stars across his armour using tau blood, opaque and bright against the matt-black shell.

Its private constellation of gore dripped and ran together as it killed. One wore no helmet, and its face was a bloodless white maggot-mask with eyes like embers. A nearby guela shot it, screaming out a prayer at the top of his voice, and ripped off the monster's ear. Blood the colour and consistency of oil snaked along its neck and it smiled, enjoying the sensation.

One ripped open a building with a greasy krak grenade, laughing and cackling as the dust blossomed around it. It stalked into the wreckage and dragged the buildings mewling occupants into the street.

Then it

It

Kais watched until the civilians were all dead. It took a long time.

Montau Marines. Twisted versions of the blue-armoured colossus on the comm. Hed seen their kind on the *Enduring Blade*, of course, his memories were thick with their cruel laughter, but in that decaying ship tomb, overcome by the rage and the bitterness, hed been beyond speculation. In the grips of the Montau hed seen only beings to be destroyed, never differentiating between enemy or ally, never asking the question that now settled on him heavily.

What are they?

The enemy? Ardias voxed, sounding matter of fact. Chaos. Evil.

Kais sought for words, hunting for resolve that he didnt feel.

The siot teaches us that evil is a falsehood, he said, clutching at the display wafer in his pouch. A-all truth is subjective. Evil is just valour, regarded from a different perspective. He tried to put conviction into his voice, attempting to believe the dogma.

Spare me your heresy! the Marine voxed, angry. How can you doubt the evidence of your own eyes?

How how can we fight this?

A question that only a coward need ask, alien.

Kaiss temper snapped, horror becoming anger in a flash. Answer me! How do you fight this?

Ceaselessly, xeno. Ceaselessly. The voice sounded tired suddenly, sighing heavily over the bolterfire chattering in the background of the channel. This thing this Chaos. You need to forget everything you know when you fight it. Do you believe that superior numbers matter? Do you think the calibre of your weapon, or or the strength of your armour will avail you now? They wont. There are no longer any rules. There are no approved tactics. All you can do, xenogen, is the best that you can.

Anyone with a trigger finger and a pair of eyes can fire a gun even those beyond the Emperors grace. But it takes more than that to fight Chaos.

I dont underst

Why would you? Listen to me, and remember: the greatest weapon you can possess in this struggle is not a plasma gun, or a bolter, or an entire armoury of tanks and cannons. Its in your head, do you hear me? You need faith.

Kais couldnt conceal his scorn. Faith in a shrivelled corpse? Thats your advice, is it? Thats your mighty power?

The pause stretched out uncomfortably. When the guela spoke again, his voice was brittle and cold. Alien. There will be a reckoning between us at the end of this. Is that clear?

Kais just grunted, choosing not to enforce his point.

You touched down in Letticas eastern district, the Space Marine said, voice returning to its businesslike growl. I have need of your assistance.

Kais cocked an eyebrow and lifted his gun. He needed time to think, to sort through his mind. This guela prattle was a distraction. Whatever it is, do it yourself.

My company was deployed to the south. It will take us too long to circle round.

I wont be at your command, guela. I dont take orders from the ignorant or the unenlightened.

And the Codex is unusually clear on the subject of refusing the assistance of abominations. Nonetheless it has been a day of firsts; I suggest you learn to adapt.

Not likely.

You have something better to be doing?

Kais frowned. He wanted to say: Ive had enough. He wanted to collapse in the pod and let it all wash over him. He wanted to bury his head in the sand and forget about blood and killing and violence and chaos and and his fathers eyes.

But it was too late, now. The Montau thing was awake in his mind and he couldnt rest until it or he was dead. Besides, there was something

Think. Why are you here? Killing was never your goal. It was a by-product. A symptom. You kill for a reason, remember!

The ethereal! The answer hit him like a warhead, splitting his world and filling him with sudden adrenaline, a shaft of light cutting through the confusion and madness. I have to find ElKovash!

You need to focus upon your priorities, the voice said, thick with scorn.

The Aun is always the priority!

I havent the time to contest the point, alien. Your ethereal is lost. If you dont help me now then there wont be another chance to find him.

If you do not comply, xenogen, then by the Emperors grace we shall all be dead within the hour.

What is this job? Kais asked, indecision wracking him.

I shall brief you en route. Get moving.

Something nagged distantly at Kaiss mind, spilling into his throat unbidden. Why me, guela? Why would you trust me to do this thing?

The counsel of an old friend. You would not understand.

A friend?

He is with the Emperor now. Im sending coordinates. Dont fail me, xeno.

ElLusha settled into the carapace gratefully, reacquainting himself with the

padding interior like a meeting of old friends. A web of cool air drifted past his face and along his spine, chasing away the nascent feelings of stifling warmth.

Geneprint acknowledged, a pleasant AI voice feminine in its cadence (at his request)trilled. Welcome, Shasel Tau Lusha.

He grinned at the greeting, relaxing. The familiar flurry of claustrophobia and suffocation tension, natural responses to incarceration within such limited space, drained quickly away. A HUD faceplate slightly larger and more complex than that of a line troopers helmet descended into position above his face and swung forwards. He let his eyes accustom to the bright multi-spectral world and waited until his optimal focal distance was reached. An incautious setup could result in squinting, eye strain and migraine, none of them particularly desirable in the middle of a pitched battle.

Stop, he commanded. The creeping faceplate settled to a halt and locked off with a pleasant chime. He noted with some irritation that it was fractionally closer to his eyes than for his last mission and mused sadly to himself upon the nature of growing old. Hed have to visit the fiouis to see about some bionics, soon.

Status checks, he grunted into the microphone array, tensing the muscles of his arms and legs rhythmically to prevent cramps. A group of spongy restraints like knuckled digits closed around the back of his skull, gently but firmly restraining his head. The comm toned serenely.

VreTongata. Optimal performance. The new upper-left limb is perfect.

VreWyr. All good.

VreKoltae. Coolants are a little unbalanced, but the AI can regulate it.

Lusha clucked appreciatively as glowing icons representing his team mates imposed themselves over a radar plan. Good. Im reading a flawless status too. Next korvesas. Report.

The clipped tones of his attendant battledrones piped up.

Korvesa 12.A #34 (Combat). Optimal diagnostic. Full ammunition load.

Korvesa 921.H(s2) #01 (Artillery). Optimal diagnostic. Full ammunition load.

Their icons glowing green discs faded into being over the HUD. They orbited the stationary team slowly, like binary moons.

Very well Lusha took a deep breath and grinned, appreciating the rush of anticipation. Hed been too long away from combat. Lock down and interleave. Interface insertion in five raikans.

The battlesuits servos came to life with a quiet nimble, quickly fading to near silence. A low whine came from behind him, complex machinery sliding on well oiled rails into position. He winced, preparing himself. He hated this part.

A needle, little more than a monofilament sliver of metal, punctured his skull three torils above the terminus of his ciretz scales and entered his brain.

The nausea ran its familiar jig through his guts, forcing another wince. His fingers and hoof joints curled in reflex as their connections to his motor neurones were temporarily interrupted. The feeling, he reminded himself, was not unlike falling asleep.

And then he was the machine. He flexed a limb experimentally, enjoying the sensation of reasserted control as the nausea faded. His arm his real arm remained limp by his side, nestled snugly in its padded bindings. Instead, sensed rather than seen, a heavy fiotak ablative armature, complete with wrist-slung fusion blaster, flexed from the massive shoulder of the suit. He resisted the urge to chuckle.

He moved the muscles of his neck, mentally commanding his skull to rotate and allow him the opportunity to look around. His vertebrae remained straight and immobile but the optic cluster perched atop the suit oscillated and flexed a replacement cranium just as responsive to his neural commands as the real thing. Flicking through spectral filters was as simple as blinking.

He examined his surroundings. The dropship hold was a cavern of pale, liquid smooth surfaces, unadorned by the paraphernalia of deployment seats and shasla weapon racks. The four suits hulked in its centre.

Built like upright tanks, supported by tall, ankle-jointed lower limbs and flanked by their broad-shouldered arms (complete with retracted manipulatory digits and overslung weapons mounts), they moved their extremities with athletic grace, twisting and flexing in refined subtlety with none of the inelegant jerkiness of guela machinery. The primary sensor dusters, wedge boxes supported at the crest of the suits, peered around in interest. VreKoltae caught him staring and dipped her suits head in a nod a bizarrely organic mannerism from such artificial surroundings.

To his left, VreWyr's suit raised its right limb, heavy flamer fuel lines automatically slackening to compensate for the movement, and ignited its pilot light with a quiet hiss. The cool glow cast a gallery of soft edged shadows across the walls, bulky jetpacks reduced to smooth crescents of shade.

The battledrones were a pair of satellite discs, held aloft on thrumming anti-grav fields, diagnostically manipulating the heavy weapons slung to their bellies, checking targeting facilities and functionality.

Interface successful, Lusha grunted, instinctively running through his missile pod tracking checks and practice locking on thin air. Confirm preparations. A series of affirmations tumbled across the comm.

He took another deep breath, thinking back to the ill-fated infantry deployments at first light, all those long decs ago. How had Kais felt, he

wondered, standing on the brink, staring down into an abyss of unknown horrors and glories? He remembered the advice he'd given. The advice the boy's own father had given him, taucyr's earlier during the begel incursions.

Dont make the mistake of thinking youre ready for this.

But Kais had been ready. More than ready. Too ready. The youth had sounded broken, when last he spoke from the *Enduring Blade*. There was no other word for it. The comm-line had gone dead and his bio trace had blinked from the scans with a solitary *blip*. He'd stared into the abyss and it had opened up and swallowed him whole.

He was dead, then.

The tauva preached pragmatism over indulgence. In the face of loss, the snot espoused, an efficient tau was expected to nod in acceptance, recognise that there was nothing to be done and no sense in sorrow, and simply get on with things. It was easier said than done.

Korvre? He pushed the unsettling thoughts from his mind and opened a channel to the dropship pilot. Ready when you are.

Were at a safe altitude, Shasel. Splitting the deck now.

The world fell away beneath his feet. Dividing along a central connection, the floor of the drop bay swung open two halves of a giant trap door hinging apart in unison. As always a wave of dizziness surged over him, filling his mind with the clouds racing below: wave-borne froth vaguely concealing a dark seabed. It was an enthralling sensation.

The certainty of plummeting through the yawning hole to tumble and spin, shrieking, into the gulf of air, was a falsehood: thick connector joists held the battle-suits securely to the drop holds ceiling. They began to extend with a piston *hiss*, the four hulks lowering from the belly of the dropship like string-suspended wind-chimes. Lusha marvelled at the strangeness of it all: his mind was convinced it could feel the cold air rushing past despite the chassis encapsulating presence.

Status checks, he commanded.

Ready.

Ready.

Ready.

He grinned. Korvre?

Standby, Shasel. Umbilicals will disengage in five, four, three, two, one

The connector parted from the upper chassis of the battlesuits with a half-heard *click*. There was a jolt, spinning the world sideways. A half-formed impression of the dropship sailed overhead and was gone. And then gravity reached out and *pulled*, tumbling madness overwhelming his senses. The ground was on all sides at once.

Stability returned quickly, arms outstretched, gyroscopes locked off and

balance reasserted. The silence was endless.

Steady descent, VreTongata reported, breaking the airy quiet with a hint of nervousness in his voice. This was only his second high-altitude drop.

Drones?

Maintaining position.

Good. Unit three?

All signs are good.

Four?

Fine, Shasel.

Coolant regulators are holding out, Koltae?

Clean and efficient, Shasel.

He nodded happily. Stay alert. Engage packs at five hundred torleks. Not a second after. And easy on the deceleration I don't want any mid-air liquidations.

The cloud layer dissolved around him, its ethereal paleness replaced by the sudden visual shock of the ground beneath, approaching at impossible speed.

The onset of evening rendered the sand rose red a sea of embers stretching across every horizon. Lettica, directly below them now, was a jagged ulcer marring the desert, uneven surface casting its clawlike shadow in an ever-extending clutch as the sun lowered.

The four suits hurtled earthwards, like misfired bullets cruising along their curvaceous trajectory. Slaves at the whim of gravity. A blue light flickered twice at the corner of Lushas HUD, informing him that terminal velocity had been reached.

Pinpricks of light dappled and criss-crossed the black city, weaponsfire and explosions seeming somehow unreal under the influence of distance: bright festival lights against a dark background.

Shasel? the comm chimed. This is the *Ores Tashvar*!

Lusha rolled his eyes. Make it quick, he replied, or I'm a geta-flatbread. The other team members chuckled quietly, reassured by their leaders joviality.

The voice on the comm sounded perplexed. S-shasel?

Never mind. You've caught me at a bad time, Korui, that's all.

It's just something OUDas thought you'd want to know, Shasel

Understood. Squad eight hundred torleks, brace for firing.

Shasel, should I contact you later?

No, no

It's Shasla Kais.

What?

You said you wanted to know if there was any news.

Lushas stomach turned over.

Pragmatism. Detachment. Efficiency.

He frowned. Pragmatism be damned. Hed known Kaiss father. Hed watched the youths progress all rottaa. He owed the shasla his concern. And?

We think weve found a trace. On the surface.

You think?

Its patchy, but were confident.

Be sure, Korui. Is it him or not?

Uh

Is it him? Lusha struggled to control his eagerness, aware that his squad were listening.

Probably. The Korui replied hesitantly. Its as if his signals being blocked by so

Shasel! VreWys voice cut in urgently. Youre too low!

Lusha glanced at his altimeter, heart racing. The koruis news had short-circuited his attention for too long: hed dropped below the five hundred torlek limit.

Hissing in alarm, he brought the jetpack online quickly, overfeeding the anti-grav bursts to compensate for his tardiness and ignoring the chorus of protest chimes from the AI. The rest of the team grew more and more distant above him, decelerating at a far more sensible speed.

He overrode the jet dampeners with a rank command, ignoring the squeal of metallic protest as the burners kicked in and aided the anti-grav. The ground came up to meet him inexorably, altimeter blinking red in alarm.

Shasel? the comm chimed. He was too busy sweating and fighting for control to discern whether it was one of the team or the korui.

At an altitude of two hundred torleks, with the citys buildings fully formed and ugly beneath him, he was fairly certain he was going to make it. The jetpack was moaning like an infant at the exertions placed upon it, anti-grav distorting the very air in a long column of shimmering diffracted light. He strengthened the field higher still and felt a glut of blood rush to his head. His organs sat heavily inside him, crushed indelicately by the force of the deceleration. He choked back on the nausea and brought himself under control.

Shasel. Are you all right? The rest of the team were now just fifty torleks above.

Fine, he grunted, trying to sound unruffled. A bright stream of ordnance rattled past him, tracers peppering the sky.

Great, he thought sourly. Just what I need.

He tried to fix on the firing position but it was lost in a riot of explosions and gunfire. Until he was down amongst the violence and madness it was

difficult to appreciate its reality being detached from it by distance made it seem almost laughable, a lightshow for his own amusement.

Setting down in ten, he hissed, hoping the battlesuit could take the strain. It was going to be a bumpy landing.

Good fortune, Shasel, VreKoltae mumbled from somewhere above, voice thick with concern.

The ground came up like a battering ram, a clear street overshadowed by wrecked buildings. He pushed every remaining drop of power to the jetpack and flexed the absorption pads on the base of the suits lower limbs, angling his body shallowly to avoid a ruinous cartwheel splashdown. Hed seen it happen before.

The neural interface was supposedly unconnected to his pain centres. It should, in theory at least, be possible to lop off his mechanical limbs, fire bullets into his chassis, electrocute or burn or maim or behead the unit, without him feeling so much as a twinge of discomfort. *In theory.*

In practice, a veteran user of Crisis XV8 technology often developed hoor-ata-tchel: sympathetic ghost-pains. Phantom reactions to external damage.

Hed seen shasuis so traumatised by losing their sensor-cluster heads theyd spent kairotaas in a coma. Hed seen a shasvre who, shot in his biological leg by a lucky armour-piercing round, couldnt understand why he was unable to walk normally when he exited the suit, since its lowest limbs were perfectly intact. Hed seen shasvres at the end of their careers, minds addled by a lifetime of war, by taucyrs of bounding effortlessly across cities on thrumming jetpacks, trying to fly

The altimeter read 15tl, 10tl, 5tl

Tauva protect, he said.

And then there was only sand and dust and a bone-jarring jolt that overrode the interface and left him gagging for breath, pushing red-hot splinters up his shins and knees. The suit wobbled forwards, base pads digging ugly gouges from the city street, recoil absorbers moaning in untaulike protest at their unkind treatment. He fought for calm, grimacing through the pain, and killed the jetpack. Hed seen novice suit-users drop neatly and forget to cut the power, launching vertically again like a bouncing ball straight into the rest of their squad. Hed seen just about everything there was to see, at one time or another. None of it was pretty.

Im down, he commed with a mental shrug, fighting the instinctive desire to brush himself off. The sand was settling around him. Hed left quite a crater.

The other battlesuits executed textbook drops on either side, VreWyr perching on a ruined building incline to survey the territory.

Most impressive, Shasel Tongata enthused with characteristic

understatement. I've never seen a drop so low.

The battledrones arced out of the sky at bullet speed and came to a perfect halt without appearing to decelerate at all. Lusha felt, for a paranoid moment, like they were making fun of him.

Heavy ordnance half a torkan north, VreWyr communicated from his vantage point. Can't identify the source from here, but it's an enemy position.

Given that they were shooting at us on the way down, Lusha grumbled, I'd say that was a fair assumption.

Shasel? Koltae sounded uncertain. Who exactly are we fighting?

He remembered Kaiss' words on the comm. Was the youth still alive?

Montau. Montau!

I don't know, he said. Let's move out.

Ardias scowled into the shifting warsmog and consulted the rune icons on his auspex scanner. The third and fifth squads were creeping implacably into position, outflanking the artillery dugout they'd identified as a priority target.

Head east, he grunted. The Space Marine beside him nodded, twisting the control stick and sending the land speeder gliding, cautious of ambushes, along the smoke-shrouded streets. Ardias ignored the creeping view and kept his eyes on the scanner. The whispering urge to rage and kill was stronger than ever. He breathed deep and remembered the Codex.

Somewhere beyond the blasted remains of these few streets, perhaps three blocks from his current position, a wedge of Chaos Marines manning an anti-aircraft cannon and at least three mortar units were raining fire and death upon Lettica.

Brother-captain, Sergeant Larynz voxed. I have an audio bearing upon the warp filth.

And?

They're *laughing*.

Not for long, Ardias replied, lip curling.

The basso report of cannonfire was a constant annoyance, reverberating from buildings and shaking the air, punctuated every now and again by the distinctive *foom* of mortar shells curving upwards. Whole districts away, sooty detonations fed a fire that raged obscenely, threatening to consume the entire southern district. Citizens fighting the blaze in simple workers' clothing, desperate to protect their homes and families, were cut down by the gore-drenched Chaos things that prowled the streets, or else caught in a vicious crossfire and sent jerking to the sand, overalls punctured and bloody. Ardias had seen the footage, relayed by the scout squad he'd deployed southwards.

Most of the human troopers—guardsmen from the Dolumar barracks and storm-troopers deployed from orbit—had dug themselves into defensive

positions and were engaged in a spirited attempt to contain the blossoming daemon army. It wasn't working.

Portals yawned open seemingly at random, disgorging more and more Chaos Marines, more cackling daemon vermin, more rumbling perversions of Imperial vehicles and machines. Did they have objectives, he wondered? Did they have a single goal?

Just to kill.

The whole city was going straight to hell.

As if to prop up his wandering mind, he remembered long sermon tutorials in the schola lecturae of the barracks upon Macragge, tactical training and deployment conventions passed directly from Codex to student via a veteran-sergeant, soaked up by the young minds eager to prove their readiness for the mantle of superhumanity.

The flanking manoeuvre his squads were undertaking, miniaturised and given an unreal cheeriness by the bright lights of the scanner, was an exact replica of the standard deployment he'd been taught all those years ago. By the book. No mistakes. The Ultramarine way.

In exactly thirty-three seconds the Third tactical squad, lightly armed with bolters and grenades, would open fire from concealed positions upon the enemy dugout. They had little chance of hitting anything significant, of course, but as the gun crew scrabbled to return fire, the Fifth squad devastators armed with a withering array of heavy weaponry would crest the ridge directly behind them and blow the Chaos filth into several million tiny fragments of gore and bone. By the Codex. No mistakes.

Except

Except he hadn't been lying when he'd told the xeno there were no rules where Chaos was involved. You couldn't anticipate disorder.

Ardias had served the Emperor for many, many years. He'd fought the Eldar. Theirs was a discipline of intractable grace, stunningly swift, stunningly effective. Every unit had its role, its niche to fulfil, and would cling to it grimly. Their inflexibility their inability to adapt was their weakness.

He'd fought the Tyranids. Theirs was a simple goal. There were no complexities buried beneath the lust to devour, no unpredictable tangents in behaviour behind the simple biological imperative to consume and propagate. They were adaptable, oh yes, but predictably so. There was no randomness in their behaviour and it could therefore be anticipated.

Even the Orks, in their way, followed a set of rules. Theirs was a madness borne from utter dislocation with reason and rationality; they made up for their obvious intellectual shortcomings with a bloody-minded determination to surprise, to take the road less travelled. Their wanton disregard for convention, bizarrely, gave them a convention all of their own. Again, in their

own unique way, they were predictable.

But Chaos

Chaos wasn't even madness. Chaos went beyond the wilful randomness of the orks into a realm of almost rational irrationality. It espoused a considered form of anarchy, an almost educated approach to uneducating. It was a thing of contradictions and adaptations, of ceaseless change and unrelenting unknowability. The greatest thing Ardias had learnt throughout his years of captaincy, that wasn't inscribed in the scriptures of the Codex, was this: *The only thing you can predict about Chaos is that you can't predict it at all.*

Captain? Larynz's voice, distorted by the vox, sounded confused.

Go ahead.

We're at the dugout. They've gone, sir. There's nobody here.

Ardias realised with a start that the cannon had fallen silent. He'd been too intent on the auspex and too immersed in his thoughts to notice. He felt a cold shiver in his spine.

Where are they?

There's a trenchline buried nearby. The filth must have crawled out as we approached. Techmarine Achellus is preparing to scan the surroundings now.

Larynz

What action, Brother-cap

Larynz you get out of there.

Wh?

Get out!

The explosion shook the world.

It was felt by Marria Sleva, cowering beneath the crude table in her two-room hab, hugging herself and crying. Jonas had gone out to help fight the fire, bless him, but oh, God-Emperor it seemed like hours ago and she was scared but, oh, but the baby was due any day and he'd told her he'd told her stay put, don't move at all! He'll be back, he said. And now there were explosions outside and the house was rocking and something was knocking on the door and laughing, and she was sure she could hear chainsaws-

It was felt by Solomon Gathandre, clutching at his las-gun and thanking his lucky stars. Posted with the second Dolumar regiment, he'd been in the perfect position to scramble for the deserted reservoir system on Lettic's eastern fringe when the portals started opening. Armed with his gun, a hipflask of Old-Foiz and a stash of gantha-root rollups, he could wait out the lunacy in perfect contentment.

Away across the shadow relief buildings an almighty fireball clawed its way into the sky, shaking the ground. It looked like the whole of the south

side had decided to go skyward.

Hoouo-aaaaa he breathed, impressed.

Then the wreckage started to fall: vast slabs of blast-melted plascrete and metal tumbling along the slopes of the mine basin, and Solomon began to wonder whether hed chosen the best hiding place after all.

Crunch.

It was felt by Shasel Tau Lusha, swooping low across a shattered plaza in the citys administrative quarter. He turned his no, the battlesuits fusion blaster on a gaggle of red armoured hulks, carving their way through a knot of screaming guela with vast axes that howled and smoked as they cleaved. Watching the glowing-eyed devils smoulder and shrivel beneath the stream of superheated air was, he admitted quietly, immensely gratifying.

One of the battledrones chattered an energy spike warning to his suits AI and he was treated to a peripheral view of the boiling smoke cloud twisting and eating itself above the city to the south. He filed the incident away in his memory without comment unimpressed and instructed the team to continue with the search. The ethereal *must* be found.

It was felt by Brother Pereduz, heretic-Marine and veteran of the Iron Warriors, as he eased himself into a cellar-excavation deep underground. Three of his battle brothers, studded armour glimmering with a matt-gun-metal sheen, followed him along the tunnel. Theyd been excellent bait, Pereduz judged, laughing uproariously in a fine imitation of demented bloodlust, a convincing characteristic of other, less academic Traitor Legions.

An Iron Warrior rarely laughed.

A relay-trigger, wired to a scan-beam sensor on the surface, blipped.

Iron within, he said, voice a monotone. Iron without. He pressed down on the remote detonator in his hand and basked in the sheets of cascading dust from the roof as the whole planet seemed to tremble.

It was felt by Sergeant Larynz, Veteran of the Ultramarines Third Company, holder of the Olivius Valoricum for bravery in the course of his duties, as he and the Third Tactical Squad glanced about the crevicelike dugout with a growing sense of impending doom. Techmarine Achellus swept his scanner across a strange device half-buried in the mud.

Get out! the vox screamed.

Everything went white.

It was felt by Shasla Tau Kais, torkans distant, and he looked up from prising some strange weapon from the hands of a dead tau fireteam hed discovered

scattered across the street. Scavenging had become a vital part of his role: procuring an undamaged backpack, armfuls of auto-deploy mines, grenades, medipacks, rations

A hundred-and-one carrion supplies stained with the blood of dead comrades.

Even through the soot and gore tangled and matted across his helmet-optics, the blinding explosion from the south made him wince to protect his eyes. He didn't have much time to muse upon the maelstrom something giggled from the shadows nearby and he turned his attention back to the strange gun with professional haste.

It was felt by Captain Jehnnus Ardias.

The streets flew apart: masonry confetti enveloping him moments after the scanner went dead. A slab of girder-striated rubble tumbled horizontally on a plume of flame and splattered the Marine pilot of the land speeder like a bursting bubble. Blood scattered airily across Ardiass cheek.

Impressions surged past his consciousness: white lights and fire and smoke and, worst of all, the knowledge that he'd been fooled. Sent his men directly into a trap like a first-year rookie on a simulated mission. Suckered. Outwitted.

He'd told the xeno: *There are no longer any rules. There are no approved tactics. All you can do is the best that you can.*

His best, he reflected, had not been good enough.

The world went sideways, the land speeders nose pointed at the ground and the sky both at once, the streets gashed past in a rush of smoke and ruddy red fire and Ardias thought: *Aye, straight to hell.*

The hunger was almost intolerable. Were it not for the celestial nature of his restraints and the perpetual vitality of his spirit, his own fury and frustration would have consumed him like wildfire long before. Unable to die, his torment was limitless.

The Daemonlord Tarkhax *raged*.

Had he been alive in the true sense of the word his vocal cords would have splintered and exploded beneath the force of his ceaseless howling millennia ago. His fingers would have crumbled to ruined, bloody powder at the impotent flexing and scrabbling he subjected himself to. His eyes would be shrivelled prunes, his teeth blunted and shattered, his face clawed apart in self-inflicted flagellation, his bones hammered out of shape by the force of his flexing, gyrating madness, and his mind a maelstrom of insanity.

But he had no vocal cords to shred (and yet still he howled).

He had no fingers or nails or eyes or teeth to abuse, but still he scratched

and snarled and glared and spat and gnashed.

He had no face to claw at, but still he twisted his features randomly, inhuman fury segueing seamlessly into childlike mischief.

He had no bones to shatter, but still he clenched his spiny knuckles and shrugged his claw-pocked shoulders in turmoil.

And his mind

His mind was insane long, long before his incarceration.

As insubstantial as mist, coiling and billowing inside his glowing warp wall cage, he twitched and screamed and howled and giggled, listening intently to the ebb and flow of reality through the tiny imperfections of the gaol. In such a fashion had he wrought his influence, piece by piece, upon Severus.

And others

The governor was intelligent, at least. He suffered from an unquenchable desire to prove his worth an insecurity into which Tarkhax had gloatingly inserted his insubstantial claws. Initially after the man first visited the newly unearthed Temple abyss with a xenolinguitor servitor, all interested smiles and academic intentions Tarkhax was barely a whisper: an unconscious demi-urge acting upon the governors dreams. The fools damnation had been a slow trickle of acquiescence and diminishing resistance, forever convinced that each new heresy was his own idea, forever certain that it was he who stood to gain from the whole convoluted plot.

Tarkhax had played him like a puppet, subtle influence growing every day, guiding him through the dark rituals required to break the eldar curse. It was painstaking work, like attempting to move boulders using only blades of grass, and the frustration mounted with every moment.

But finally the seals were breaking.

Sunset. It had to be sunset.

The eldar farseer had been no fool; he understood that even the sorcerous spellsongs of his people were impermanent, transient like every other aspect of creation. Chaos came to all things, eventually. Unable to kill Tarkhax, unable even to banish him for eternity, they imprisoned him behind power-bolstered walls, exiled him to immaterial limbo and weaved an elaborate web of obstacles and falsehoods to prevent any but the most determined liberator from countering their efforts.

Guided by the daemonlord, Severuss attempts had gone beyond determination. But their final obstacle remained one last exquisite delay to leave him stamping and raging uselessly for a few hours more, counting out every split second until the sun set over the eastern mountains of Dolumar IVs principal continent. The cage had been erected beneath the waning light of the sun; only beneath parallel conditions could it be dismantled.

Two hours. Two hours until, with no more ceremony than a splatter of blood, he'd throw off his shackles and, in the name of the Changer, murder the galaxy.

And that would be just the start

The scale of the building was impossible.

Kais stared up from the floor of the hangar, picking his way past construction equipment and cable bundles thicker than a clonebeast, and mused in lightheaded awe upon the sense of constructing a palace of such massiveness within the confines of the flimsy (albeit vast) warehouse.

Its architecture was positively bizarre: a chapel-fortress rising up sixty storeys or more, vaulted windows and defensive emplacements pocking every square torlek of stone and metal. Its external complexity outdid even that of the Imperial warships which, similarly striated by obsidian buttresses and tiered alcoves, it resembled. The conventions of a sturdy, durable edifice, so typical amongst the buildings of the city beyond, were somehow forgotten in favour of a fantastical, exotic aesthetic. No wide foundations based the structure, rather a pair of vast towers flared upwards, joining in a gaggle of enormous tensile brackets and load-bearing machinery. Thus twinned, like prehistoric monoliths supporting a keystone load, the tower struts bore the remainder of the buildings bulk.

But the strangeness went on. Way above almost occluded in the clouds of moisture lurking in the shadows of the hangars upper reaches the broad ramparts of the palace's roof extended way beyond the sensible limits of the central stack. The flared top-heaviness created a sense of unwieldy clumsiness; an impression compounded by an apparently random outcropping of curved chambers and sensory outlooks from the forward facing facade. Stranger still, suspended from beneath the limits of the palace's outermost reaches like enormous stalactites, a pair of vast heavy weapons hung immobile, house-sized joints like elbows inert and silent.

Kais frowned.

Like *elbows*

He closed his eyes and mentally adjusted his frame of reference before looking upwards once again. His breath caught in his throat.

Not monolith-towers; legs.

Not building-stalactites; weapon-tipped arms.

Not an over-wide series of ramparts and spires; shoulders.

Shoulders supporting a curved head, no less, complete with mournful eye sockets and a sweeping jawline.

By the path he hissed, his ability to restrain himself from exclamations long since forgotten

A dataload burst in his memory, didactic information implanted during his training swimming unbidden to the fore of his consciousness. Hed examined it before, this one, reading through the artificial memories like data wafers inside his head during some sleepless night in the battledome. He hadnt fully believed it, back then.

An Imperial titan, haloed by the harsh floodlights of the gigahanger, cast its hunchbacked shadow across him and reduced him to microscopic ineffectuality, deep shaded eye sockets filling his world with vast, godlike mournfulness. Such things were little more than a whisper to his race. City-sized war machines: the stuff of untaulike fancy and legend. Completely absurd, the Shasartol said, an irrational propaganda item dreamed up by some guela administrator to terrify those races less focused than the tau into submission.

Just make-believe.

Looming over.

If it were alive; if its machine parts were muscle and bone and sinew; if its overshadowed view ports were eyes; if its portcullis vents were nostrils and ears; if in fact it were a giant, crouching massively within its oubliette dwelling, it wouldnt even have noticed him.

Ardias? he commed, still feeling light headed. The Ultramarines instructions had been characteristically vague: the guela fleet had detected some sort of war vehicle being powered up in Letticas eastern districts and in the absence of any friendly units confirming their involvement had decided it had been hijacked by Chaos forces. Kaiss task was, simply, to stop them. He might as well cast grains of sand at a mountain.

Far, far above, he thought he could hear laughing. An unhuman, untau cackle scatter-echoing on the uneven surfaces of the titan and flitting around the hangar. Mocking him. A sequence of lights rose up from nowhere in the monstrositys central core with a whine, making his heart race. Somewhere inside the colossal shell the twisted minions of the Dark Powers, those Montau devils made flesh, were powering up, settling in, preparing themselves.

Kaiss didactic memories lacked any footage of a titan in action but One didnt need the imagination of a fiola to anticipate the horror. Street-sized strides. Warship-strength weapons. Crushing. Obliterating.

Without finesse, without grace, without subtlety: a walking engine of mass-destruction. Wholesale murder.

Ardias?

Still no answer. In contacting him aboard the *Enduring Blade*, the Space Marine had altered his helmet communicator somehow, pushing aside the detector tightbeam he shared with his tau comrades and imposing some sort

of unshiftable guela code. Since then, Kais had been unable to raise Lusha or the *Ores Tashvar*, despite repeated attempts. The ugly holes and dents covering his helmet not to mention the unexploded bolter shell still lodged deep within the fiotak were not, he suspected, helping.

Abstractly, he wondered if the *Ores Tashvar* was still there at all. He wondered where Lusha was; whether he was still riding on the optic signals; how disappointed he felt at his pupils loss of control. He wondered about Ju and Vhol and where they were fighting or injured or dead. He wondered about Kovash and the grey-haired admiral and the governor with his feral smile and his gaudy robes. He wondered where in the name of the One Path he fitted into any of this madness.

But more than anything else, above all things, he wondered about how Ardias could have been so colossally stupid to imagine that he, a lone tau, could possibly hope to stop a titan. And now he couldnt even contact the grizzled snaeta to tell him what he thought of him.

Focus.

Were all cogs in the machine.

He realised with a twinge of guilt that he was chuckling beneath his breath at the thought of his fathers famous machine oratory. It had been intended as a cunning metaphor: a fitting symbol of unity, of all parts relying on all others. Cogs and chains and pistons and levers, all as important as one another. A stirring speech and a resounding, enduring allegory for the tauva.

Kais wondered what his father might think of him now, standing before the most colossal machine of all and seriously contemplating its destruction.

The gun felt heavy in his hands, its unfamiliar balance more than made up for by its usefulness. The journey to the hangar had not been without incident.

The weapon was vaguely reminiscent of a pulse rifle: a long barrel and squat stock with little obvious room for firing mechanisms. It was almost completely smooth but for a long groove running the length of the muzzle on either side. Unlike its rifle counterpart, it was black, a glossless matt darkness that made it seem unreal a lance of shadows obstructing the paleness of his gloves. Hed seen weapons like it before: vast things slung to the stalwart undersides of Moray-class gun-ships, or else mounted massively on the wide shoulders of Broadside battlesuits.

It was a railgun, in miniature, and hed already used it to punch holes through Traitor Marines with as little effort as sliding a needle through fabric. Tiny gravitic accelerators running the length of the barrel hyperaccelerated a single shell to unimaginable speeds: a linear concentration of energies that negated recoil and left its target blindly clutching at itself, senses far too slow to even register the impact until it was too late.

New technology, he guessed. Experimental, maybe. A prototype infantry

version of an artillery weapon, fielded by test-shasuis as a final assessment of its abilities. Theyd died.

Too bad for them.

Kais squared his shoulders, locked off the auto-load on the coal-black gun, and stalked forwards towards the titans feet, ignoring the piles of dead guela technicians the littered the ground.

Captain Ardias? Come in, Captain Ardias.

Come-in?

WW

Ardias? Reply, please.

what is? What?

Captain Ardias? Lord, is that you?

uungh Emperors grace what happened?

Lord? Are you all right?

Nothing serious. A few new scars.

Lord, this is Ensign Corgan, with the *Purgatus*.

This had better be important. Ive just lost two entire squads. I havent time for navy trivialities

My lord We think weve found the epicentre.

The epicentre?

The centre of the warp portals. Like an uh

An HQ?

Yes Yes, I suppose so. Commissar Gratildus with the Third battalion managed to discuss things with an enemy prisoner and

Skip it. Where?

East, my lord. The mountains, to the east. It looks subterranean, some sort of pit.

Send me the co-ordinates.

Bu

Ensign. Fifteen of my brothers are dead. My communicator is damaged, I cant patch through to the rest of my company and even if I could, Im cut off from them by a fire like an Inferria-Prime summer. My land speeder is all but destroyed, Ive lost two fingers from my left hand and at least five of my ribs are broken. Do not waste my time.

S-sending co-ordinates now

Plaguelord Siphistus, Disease Marine of the Death Guard Legion, twitched his carrion lips into a lopsided impression of a smile and hissed pleasurably A strand of spittle, uncollected by the gyrations of his prehensile tongue,

collected in bubble-flecked viscosity at the corner of his mouth and began the slow journey across his ulcerous chin.

Of his entire face, the only features not actively degrading in malignant pestilence were his eyes, burning with crystal intelligence: icebergs adrift in a polluted ocean. He giggled like a schoolchild and drummed his fingers encased in millennia-old armour against the armrests of the throne.

Old Grandfather Nurgle, most ancient and intractable of the Chaos Gods, had been truly generous this day. Siphistuss excitement overcame him briefly and he coughed a thick soup of infected fluids, bubbling and wheezing glutinously and not bothering to wipe away the sputum.

Power at sixty per cent one of the scurrying plague-priests gurgled, leech-like hands sucking raw information from the consoles around the command nave. Ready now, lordship, yes.

Good. Good. Mm. He sneered in pleasure, pink tongue flitting briefly from his mouth to clean his irises, lizardlike. Do it. Do it now.

Two more plague-priests once-black robes of the Adeptus Mechanicus now stained with green mould and pus-like contagion shuffled forwards in a chorus of creaking joints and rasping breaths, carrying the mindcrown. They settled it over his bald skull reverently, tightening clasps and inserting connector cables with clumsy, sluglike fingers.

Connecting now, lordship, one hissed, twisting a valve wheel.

Unfamiliar sensations rocked through the plague lord; a barrage of information and uncertainty, challenging his self-perceptions and opening conduits of thought and movement unconnected to his physicality. He could see from any one of a hundred internal cameras, each revealing the tight confines of the titans interior. He wondered if this was how flies felt: compound pupils flitting across myriad views at will.

He could gaze through the city machines eyes, hundreds upon hundreds of alternative angles and filters endowing him with complete wraparound sensory overload. He could hear what it heard, taste the air itself with electronic sensitivity, detect odours and gases and pheromones, feel its power emissions like a warm glow in his own guts-He was the titan-god.

He was the first machine child of the factories of Dolumar IV, an incarnate engine of destruction, holy vessel for the nascent machine spirit *Imperio Prince-Nebulae Draconis*, which moved through its logic engines with youthful exuberance, perplexed and invigorated by the presence of its first pilot.

Siphistus giggled again.

Hello, my pretty-pretty he whispered, thoughts coiling insidiously around and through the confused spirit. Wont you come share with me?

Princeps? the machine thought, logic engine consciousness filled with

slow analysis.

Yess he hissed. Yess, your princeps. Lord Siph. Me. Yess. Wont you come share?

The god-mind surged with power and dissolved into his thoughts, tasting and melding sensually, trusting in the sincerity and morality of its pilot guide to provide its moral compass. A child, placing its trust in a doting parent.

They intertwined and ran together.

When the two thought streams detached, Siphistuss consciousness withdrawing slowly to behold its work, the *Imperio Prince-Nebulae Draconis* was changed. Radically changed.

Lordship? a Traitor Marine flanking his throne leaned closed to him, concerned. Is all well?

No, brother Siphistus chuckled, dragging a maggot finger across his boil-encrusted brow. All is vile.

Like tendrils of decay, twisting and reticulating, black thoughts spiralled through the machine-spirit; pestilent conceits and amoralities swelling throughout its logic engines with a groan of displaced circuitry. *All things rot*, it accepted with childlike wonder. *All things perish and decay and fester. Why fight against nature?*

The indefinable shadow of the ruinous powers like a dark light hardened every edge and bled the colours from every heraldic icon within the command deck. The power gauges shrieked as, deep in the machines generarium heart, colossal engines rumbled to life with a violet aura of crackling energies.

My child Siphistus crooned, a proud father.

Tumorous energies blossomed hungrily on every deck, lights surging to full strength then dimming to a more acceptable half-lit gloom, waste energies venting deliberately into the corridors, filling the internal spaces of the warmachine with pungent fumes and the unmistakable miasma of decay.

The *Imperio Prince-Nebulae Draconis* flowed through the titans ancient shell like a black cloud, oozing filth and decay from every bulkhead, staining its innards with putrid energies and releasing torrents of toxins into its cloister arteries. The titan mouldered from the inside.

New name the spirit hissed, naive gentleness replaced by a forceful strength, making Siphistus wince at the urgency of its thoughts. *New naaaaaaame.*

Yes, youngling yess he grinned, nodding. For you, anything.

The spirit hissed its new name, ethereal words echoing massively inside his cancerous skull. Captivating, he grinned, A fine choice, my child.

Siphistus returned his attention to the command deck. A small gaggle of Traitor Marines, varied armour styles colourfully declaring their different originator Legions, milled about with guns drawn, anticipating a fine view of

the coming destruction. The Plaguelord recognised blood-red World Eaters and gaudy Emperors Children lurking amongst his own Plaguemarines, even an occasional blue-and-gold representative of the Thousand Sons, thrumming with arcane sorceries. Daemon things cackled and hissed, traitor priests slithering from console to console, two sleek-limbed Chaos Raptors perched loftily in the portcullis viewing bays, avian spines hunched. To witness them all together, bitter differences and rivalries disregarded, favoured gods collaborating with rare unity in a pantheon of insanity, warmed the plague lords long-rotten heart with a frail surge of pleasure.

All of them were silent. Dumbfounded. Dwarfed by the monstrous power of this vessel, this living chaos-god, this titan-contaminator, this city-sized disciple of Nurgle.

Gendemen he gurgled, phlegmatic voice catching and rasping unkindly in his throat. The *Machina Dragon-Bile* salutes you!

The beast raised a limb and howled. The Marines clashed their weapons together and laughed and roared. Siphistus grinned and giggled and chuckled, and didnt ever want to stop.

Somewhere a gun opened fire.

ElLusha jumped a building distractedly and sent the combat drones ghosting along a side street, data feeds opening secondary windows on his HUD. A target-acquired tone rang out and he fired off a pair of missiles, turning away dismissively as the smoke trails corkscrewed away. Somewhere amongst the city wreckage the tiny drone-controlled stingers weaved and rushed amongst crumbled pillars and zeroed in on a group of twisted chaos-things efficiently. They were everywhere. A black tide, impossible to fully beat back.

The battlesuit team pushed across the western districts, sensors carefully attuned to Aunel Kovashs precise biosignature. It was like seeking a trepa in a geroshi.

This is a waste of time Lusha declared, distractedly sweeping his fusion blaster across an open-fronted building to smoke out a gaggle of winged daemonettes. VreWyr and VreKoltae picked off the chittering fiends with cool precision.

You think we should try a different district, Shasel? Tongata commed, scouting ahead, his voice excited. The sky was a ploughed field of clouds and artillery detonations, long trails of smoke undulating vertically from countless fires throughout the city.

No point. There are other teams operating all across the city

You dont think well find him, Shasel?

He sighed, feeling old. Listening to hunches, he remembered OShiur (who was more guilty of it than most) saying with a wry smile, was the first sign of

madness.

I think I think that all rotaa weve been bluffing and counter bluffing, and if this dirty little war has one recognisable feature, its expecting the unexpected.

Shasel?

Consider. These warriors. These Chaos creatures. They seem to me as near to Montau as it is possible to be Do they strike you as rational beings?

Well, no, but

So, answer me this Where does an irrational force conceal its prisoners? Rationally, the ethereal would be well guarded held wherever the enemy numbers are thickest. Here in the city, correct? But irrationally

Outside the city?

Hmm.

The drones returned from the side streets silently, one of them venting smoke from a lucky bolter shot. It wobbled erratically, as if embarrassed, before regaining balance. Lusha chewed his lip before opening a channel to the *Ores Tashvar*.

UiGortyl here. How goes the hunt, Shasel?

Listen to me, Korui. I want you to expand the survey drones target areas.

What? Why?

I dont care how you do it. Use every drone youve got, if you have to. I want sensor checks for energy readings, lifesigns, weaponsfire, comm-frequencies everything.

Shasel, a planetwide survey would take rotaas!

Then I suggest you get started. Start outside the city. Work outwards. They wont be far away supplies, reinforcements, that sort of thing Itll be close

What will?

I dont know. You tell me.

But

Skip it, Korui. Get to it.

The voice on the comm was quietly surly. Of course, Shasel.

Good. Is there any other news on LaKais?

We lost the reading. It was probably just a sensor fault.

Lusha shook his head, ignoring his teams weapons-fire from further along the street. Korui how long since you graduated from saal rank?

W-what?

You heard me. How long?

Seven taucyrs

And in all that time, how many sensor faults have you encountered?

Uh

Quite. Keep scanning for him. If hes alive, I want to know it. Lusha out.

He cut the channel before the crewman could respond, and bounded into the air with unnatural lightness to assist his team.

He trod the path.

A sword-edge trail, bordered by the abyssal depths of madness.

The bloodlust threatened to overwhelm him again, red mists descending in a carefree mélange of blood-snarled, wet-lipped violence. It whispered and trilled hungrily: a song of killing and unstoppable. *You cant die*, it grinned. *Youre a god!*

It was lying. The rational part of him knew it, digging its fingertips in and clinging to the tenets of the siot grimly. No compromise. Equilibrium above excess. Unity above unrest. Altruism above egotism.

The choice seemed a cruel one:

Machine or beast.

Soulless efficiency or primitive savagery.

Tauva or Montau.

Was there no middle ground?

Kais gritted his teeth and squeezed the trigger over and over again, punching gore holes through black and red armour, boring glow-edged craters into daemon flesh, lancing black blood wounds with perfect, silent, recoilless efficiency. A bolter shell blasted open what little remained of his torso guard in a spray of shattered fiotak and he stumbled into the shadows with a strangled yelp. The roaring of the Marine throng eclipsed even the chattering of their weapons, and he realised with a momentary rush of astonishment that, in their haste to confront him, they were casually blasting each other aside.

The titan had been an almost impossible obstacle. Hed risen through its crawl spaces like a parasite, planting a trail of bombs as he clambered ever upwards, losing all sense of time and scale somewhere within its buttressed midriff. Already its interior was changing: the inelegant lines and angles of guela construction softening with moist organic corruption, green hazes filling the air and a bitter patina, like oil-black rust, creeping stealthily across the gloomy bulkheads.

His legs ached, head throbbing with the physical exertion of the climb. He remembered once what seemed like an age ago now, but in fact only that morning being physically sickened by the idea of guela blood staining his hooves. Now the matted gristle and filth of humans, tau and, worse, the stinking black fluids of Chaos, were drying and glistening across hooves, ankles, legs He looked liked hed waded through a sea of blood, and, terrifyingly, he couldnt bring himself to care.

The wound on his leg was infected, he knew, seeping with ineffectual

antibodies and crusted by an ugly series of lesions. Hed paused to apply fresh medipacks twice during the ascent, squatting in shadowed recesses and biting back on the screams of pain welling in his throat.

He returned to the present with a jolt, the chatter of chaotic gunfire suddenly conspicuous in its absence. He risked a glance over the obsidian console and withdrew into cover with a hiss.

The Chaos filth on the command deck had calmed, resolving themselves with some loosely organised sense of purpose. Stepping over the mangled shells of their comrades, several had taken up firing positions and were waiting with unnatural concentration bent upon the second that he revealed himself, guns with jagged toothed maws trained unwaveringly.

Come out come out come out come out, little piggy something giggled, its voice a singsong shrill.

A grenade skittered into the recess beside him. He stared at it for long raikans with an incomprehensible feeling of indignation, reviewing his choices: remain where he was and die; dive out of cover and die.

Not really thinking, acting on adrenaline-wired instincts more than rational thought, he scooped up the grenade and bowled it back towards the Marines, fully expecting his hand to detonate in bone-flecked cyan madness. He just made it, withdrawing himself behind the console as it arced away to erupt in mid-air. A tumult of fire and shrapnel peppered the outward surfaces of his cover.

He leapt into the blastwave without waiting, ignoring the agony of his wounded leg as he pushed down on it and surged forwards. A greasy smoke patch occluded his advance, tumbling shapes half seen through the haze shouting and bickering. Some peripheral part of his mind registered the bloodslick across the floor with a surge of triumph, as shrapnel-diced bits of power armour crumpled like paper.

And then he was through the smoke and amongst them, a tawny blur barely reaching chest height on these daemoniac hulks, which spun and fired and cleaved with growling blades, just missing their elusive prey. More often than not they impacted cruelly against their comrades, close confines turning every carefully executed lunge into a brawlers hack, every well-aimed shot into a point-blank bloodsplatter disaster.

Kais kept low, fighting back on the sickly sweet Mon-tau whispers, and sowed madness throughout the command nave.

Keraz the Violator vented his frustration joyously.

Hed been denied his rightful butchery upon the orbiting vessel, commanded to escort the prisoners down to the planet. Him, Champion of the Blood God, on escort duty like a novice pup! The indignity made him shriek.

Hed been ordered and commanded by the sneering governor, unable to hack the smug head from its over-pampered shoulders by the sorcerous bindings protecting it. Hed been dispatched to Lettica to oversee the battle, travelling instantaneously through the last crumbling fragments of the eldars warp-prison as it shook itself apart. Then, diverting to the eastern districts with news of the titans discovery, hed anticipated a spectacle worthy of a Lord of Destruction.

Hed spent an hour and a half milling about in tedious expectation as the plaguelord in the pilots chair coaxed power from the war machines engine.

He was bored. He was blood-thirsty.

And finally, like an offering from the Throne of Bone itself, like a ray of darklight penetrating the interminable clouds of tedium, a morsel of prey flesh had come his way. A beige blur to his right sent him spinning hungrily, daemon axe laughing and delighting in its red and gold arc. It bit flesh, wailing its song of cleaved bone and armour, and Keraz gloried in the destruction.

Abruptly the prey morsel was at his left, ducking beneath a hail of bolter fire from some other idiot Marine. Keraz, grateful for the preys hardiness (protracting his moment of grisly pleasure), backstepped and cleaved leftwards, and again to the right, then a downward chopping blow, a spinning orbit slice, always chasing the elusive beige and tawny shape.

Every time he turned the xenogen helmet ghosted past his view, lost in a boiling sea of battle lust and bloodsplatter. In no time at all the rage came upon him, the berserker fury turning his muscles to fire and his mind to steam, and he gave up on any logical means of bonehewing the shadow-quick enemy in a whirlwind of undirected insanity. Flesh gurgled, armour parted, bones shattered.

Blood for the Blood God!

When finally the fit abated and he glanced about himself, the slow realisation of something being wrong stole upon him. Jellylike lumps of meat, encased in spine-tipped, chain-festooned armour, cluttered the deck. A dozen Chaos Marine bodies, dejointed in thoughtless butchery, reduced to stinking black charnel and dusty necrosis. Axe wounds on every surface. Nothing moved in the command nave.

The Blood God, upon reflection, would not celebrate his name this day.

The xenogen stepped out of the shadows, head tilted in disbelieving gratitude. It shot him twice in the chest, and Khorne the Butcher God guzzled his soul with relish.

Kais approached the vile creature in the throne, watching him with a silent glare of hate. It was powerless, nauseous power armour bound to the chair.

with thick cords and safety straps, head encased within a weird profusion of cables and gadgetry. Apart from Kais, it was the only thing still alive in the command nave.

The red-armoured devil had brutalised everything that moved, carving a gruesome path through its protesting comrades. If ever Kais was confronted by the reality of the Montau, it was in that moment of orgiastic carnage; without target or rationality or reason. Killing the butcher had felt like cauterising a wound.

The diseased figure in the throne gurgled quietly. Thick sludge dribbled obscenely from its mouth, curled into a dour sneer of defiance. Its bright eyes, arctic blue irises glimmering in the half light, tracked him as he moved.

Here, he said, placing the final auto-deploy charge in its pus-flecked lap. Then he turned and stalked out.

VII

18.37 HRS (SYS. LOCAL DOLUMAR IV, Ultima Seg. #4356/E)

The cavern, its subterranean walls damp with sweat, echoed to a chorus of ugly words and unformed gurgles. Governor Lord Meyloch Severus paused in his chanting, drawing a breath and licking his lips. Too many of these alien phrases and litanies transcribed long ago by servitors procured secretly from the Adeptus Mechanicus required an intolerable abundance of uncomfortable syllables that dried out his mouth and made his throat ache. A small price to pay, he supposed. The servitors had lasted about a month each, he recalled, carefully attuned minds quickly succumbing to the burden of xenoheresy and shutting down in smoke-belching frenzies. One had bitten off its own fingers in a last-ditch attempt to arrest its writings, mutilated digits squirting blood and lubricant feebly across the imprint wafers it perched over, stylus clattering to the floor. Had it not been for his impatience to finish translating the eldar text, Severus would have found the entire episode highly comical.

As it was, the cartouche that had sealed the entrance to the temple-pit had been of negligible value, simply heroic accounts of the warlocks whod wrought the warp prison and their leader, Farseer Jur Telissa. Severus often found himself dreaming at night of the fluted psych-helm of the alien sorcerer, enjoying the sensation of obliterating the figures pale, serene features in an imaginative variety of ways. On those nights he awoke in disappointment, knowing that Telissa was far, far beyond his vengeful reach and feeling somehow, strangely, as though the bitterness and anger werent his own.

Still, the sensation of a second voice in his mind had become an entirely routine phenomenon over the years, a manifestation he had long ago assumed of his innermost instincts and desires. He recalled wondering briefly years ago whether everyone enjoyed the same inner monologue of lusts and ambitions, like a whispered mantra in their skulls, then decided quickly that he didnt give a groxs-arse what anyone else felt or thought. He was above that.

If the cartouche was of little practical use, then at the very least it had awoken within him an interest, a grim appeal to study and unravel the legend of Tarkhax which, through the years, manifested with burgeoning strength until hed plundered every resource; collected a secret library of material including even a skin-bound copy of the *Liber Maelignicus*; opened paths of communication with black astropaths across the galaxy that left his own

message-dispatching psykers gibbering and deranged; and made contact with every dubious cult and coven within the system. At some point academic interest became professional obsession, and without even recalling the moment that spiritual inertia had been overcome, he was plunging headlong towards realigning his worship and becoming deeply embroiled in the plan to release Tarkhax from his torment. The eldar, it transpired, had overestimated the morality of Dolumars eventual settlers.

He returned his mind to the present.

The cowed things to either side of him, twisted forms only vaguely suggested by the awkward shadows of their robes, continued their chanting without hiatus. If they were aware of his pause, or even of his presence, they gave no indication of it, heads bent downwards and voices thick with the effects of physical mutation. Each one stood upon a major apex of a seven-pointed star the fifth extremity of which he himself occupied surrounded by an ocean of inscriptions and runes on the floor.

Severus stared at each chanting shape in turn, silently offering veneration to every priests patron god. To be considered worthy of inclusion within the dark rites that would free Tarkhax was an honour above and beyond his expectations.

The representative of Old Grandfather Nurgle to his left, supplicating to its mouldering god of pestilence and decay, was a withered shape leaning heavily on a gnarled cane, dressed in tattered robes of bilious green and brown. Its voice was thick with moisture and clotted saliva and it paused frequently to cough, spluttering a viscous red-black paste across the floor. Flies orbited the lugubrious figure in an orgy of decaying stinks.

To its side, resplendent in a patchwork robe of rainbow hues and glimmering jewels, a priest of Slaanesh gestured grandly and hissed in a reed-thin voice. Worship of the hedonist god of pleasure and pain quickly aroused a sense of numbness in his followers, exposure to the vilest and most raucous of experiences deadening the senses to all but the most riotous of gratifications. Thus the Slaanesh priest dressed in a mélange of clashing hues and bright-edge patterns, dragging knives across its exposed arms every few moments in an attempt to feel, groaning in ecstasy at every dimly experienced moment of discomfort.

At the next point of the star was a bulky priest of the Blood God, Khorne. Draped in butchers robes of black leather and studded chains, waving a polished cleaver with every sorcerous gesticulation, the gravel-voiced figure created an impression of raging impatience, as if the very idea of spell-chanting was a tedious impediment to the far more rewarding pursuit of carnage and blood spilling. Given the semi-cleaved heads and limbs it had carefully arranged around itself, Severus guessed it was more than adept at

both.

And finally, to his immediate right, a sorcerer-devotee of Tzeentch, the Changer of Ways, spread-eagled its limbs and *glowed* with power. Besides the mirrorglass mask concealing its facial features, not one part of the figures form was permanent. Its fingers writhed and melted together, forming claws and blades and osmotic leech-mouths; its arms boiled with under-skin turbulence, a shifting landscape of scales and hair and suckers and spines; its legs churned with polymorphic fluidity from state to state and its voice was a transient chorus of tones: soft becoming hard, rasp becoming trill. Everything about it characterised constant unending change. As befitted Tarkhaxs status as a child of Tzeentch, the sorcerer-priest occupied the central apex of the star, channelling energy zealously.

Together, the four heretic-priests (surrounded to various degrees by acolytes and familiars and items of power) wove an energy web of fluctuating colours and sounds a boiling lance of power to shatter apart the daemonlords imprisonment and unleash him at last upon reality.

Severus glanced at his wrist piece and smiled.

forty minutes

The last two points upon the star, minor vertices to be sure, but more than enough for his purposes, were occupied by his prisoners. Secured with wrist-constricting chains to immovable stanchions, Fleet-Admiral Constantine and Aunel Tau Kovash were the unwitting conduits of horrific energies. A pale violet corona surrounded each one, unnatural flames coruscating across their bodies. Constantines voice had given out a little over ten minutes ago, warp-be-praised; his screams and curses were growing tiresome. By now, Severus was pleased to note, his very flesh was beginning to shift, mutations bubbling through his body like clots of blood hulking painfully along veins and arteries, eyes rolled back into his head.

Coming along nicely, he thought.

The tau, by comparison, was an entirely disappointing subject. Around his skull the energies seemed to boil and flex, hunting impotently for some foothold of emotion or excess with which to work. Impervious to psychic persuasion, a living embodiment of focus and calm, the ethereal was proving to be a very difficult creature to corrupt. Severus rather suspected that, when he arrived, Tarkhax would deem the tau race unworthy of Chaoss more insidious attentions and choose to obliterate them instead.

He shrugged mentally. At least hed tried. Glancing at the clock again with growing impatience, Severus took a breath and resumed the sonorous chant that would, as night fell across the pits entrance far, far above, release his new lord and master.

The land speeder hacked and coughed its way through the industrial quarter of Lettica, its dented prow trailing a long beard of black-purple smoke, dipping every few moments to grate noisily against the street before lurching upright again.

For Captain Ardias, accustomed to the clipped Codex-standard precision of Ultramarine behaviour, it was hardly a dignified mode of transport. Passing through hotly contested zones of violence human and tau bodies mingling with those of Chaos warriors, gunfire and grenade blossoms marking every street corner he grimly attributed the lack of pernicious fire aimed at him to the astonished amusement with which enemies and allies alike regarded him as he passed.

Like them, he considered the continued functioning of the land speeder something of a minor miracle, and hissed thankful prayers to Guilliman, the Emperor and whatever unknown techmarine had originally built the chassis. Despite the dents, sparks, smoke-belching fissures and various red-blinking warning icons, received at the ungentle end of the enormous bomb blast, the hovering contrivance delivered him safely to the shadow of the districts central hangar with no more damage than a thumping headache and a wounded sense of pride. He was in no mood for tolerating xeno-contact when he arrived.

The blood-caked tau with the dented helmet, unexploded bolter shell still lurking within, watched him approach along the street with arms crossed, a healthy distance between his slouched position and the vast hangar.

The rogue element, Delpheus had said, before he died. *The warrior with the bomb in his head*.

This tau, this Kais, had singlehandedly wiped out the bridge of an Emperor-class battlecruiser. Hed crippled the *Enduring Blades* weapons systems, fought through the anarchy that consumed the ship to the drop pods and survived ever since. More than enough proof of his abilities. Still, it went against everything Ardias believed to consort, trust and rely upon the skills of an alien, even one endorsed by an Adeptus Astartes librarian, and drawing level with the cross-armed figure now confirmed every one of his fears.

Fool! he roared, leaping to the sand and drawing his pistol. I told you to sabotage the war machine, not await my arrival! We cant hope to stop it in time; youve doomed un

Human, the alien said calmly, holding up something small and silver. Watch.

It pressed a button.

Behind it the hangar went up like a box stuffed with firecrackers and for the briefest of moments Ardias could see the colossal shape of the titan shadowed against the flames, crisp hangar walls falling away like a layer of

skin. It was a hunchback of smoke and shadow, an ogre of gargantuan proportions that basked no, drowned in its wreath of fire. All too soon it was lost to a series of detonations that plucked chunks from its torso and split apart its joints. Ugly gouts of plasma and promethium fuel vented outwards: fiery spouts from a dying whale, flexing and breaching its death throes in a blazing spectacle of incandescence.

An upper limb sheared away from the torso with slow gravity, tumbling downwards in an avalanche of debris. The noise of its impact jerked Ardias from his astonishment, leaving him uncomfortably aware of his proximity to the collapsing machine and, more annoyingly of the tau warrior, who stood regarding his expression of awe with tilt-headed fascination.

As he approached through the city he wondered vaguely what progress the alien might have made. He envisioned finding the creature's body at the titans base, hurled dismissively from whichever inner tier at which its progress had faltered. He envisioned it cowering in a shadowy corner of the hangar, too horrified by the glory of Imperial engineering to even move. He imagined it failing and dying, or else succeeding with painstaking slowness. He had, to be blunt, not been confident.

He never considered arriving to find the job already done.

You had better come with me, he growled, motioning towards the land speeder, before the whole thing comes down on top of us.

I'll take that as a well done, the alien grunted, clambering gingerly into the passenger seat.

Do what you want. We have work to do.

The vehicle moved off, sand mixing with soot and ash in a billowed cloudform wake. Behind it the titan wobbled uncertainly, knee joint buckling with enormous inevitability, the scene lent an eerie slowness by the scale of destruction. The building-machine toppled like a foundationless tower, tumbling apart in a riot of metal and stonedust, sparks and smoke swept along in its arc.

The noise of its impact shuddered throughout the city for long, ugly seconds, colossal slabs of armour and masonry flattening the surrounding buildings and choking everything in a tsunami of opaque dust that guzzled the light ravenously. Ardias and Kais were gone before the echoes stopped.

Korvesa 66.G#77 (Orbsat Surveillance) arranged itself carefully in relation to the other drones filling its airspace and, at the *Ores Tashvars* command, trained every one of its sensors on the planetary surface.

Extending in a wide grid of sense clusters, radar-scanners and high-altitude surveyors, every available drone at the tau flotillas command had been hastily deployed. Weapons droids mingled with engineering apparatus,

blocky chaff drones interspersed sparsely with maintenance constructs, top-of-the-range spy-sat cameras and barely sentient control-applicators seeming awkward and disparate in close proximity comparison. And every last one from the most technologically advanced to the simplest of unipurpose models, from those with sensory equipment able to pinpoint a single individual in twenty different spectrums through a hundred torkans of atmosphere and cloud cover, to the lowliest of sightless fuel-gauge drones with barely enough scan sensitivity to penetrate the exosphere trained the colossal might of their combined awareness upon the planetary surface and, in a closely choreographed orbital dance, spiralled their attention outwards from the city.

Every third mortek-raikan 66.G flickered its attention across the precise bio readings and spectral signatures of Aunel Tau Kovash, harvested from its memory banks and shared with the rest of the drone army. Thus did its sensor sweeps occur in three distinct segments: a reminder of its target; a momentary burst of information culled from its sensors and an alignment of the two, comparing and contrasting. The process was repeated over and over, thirty times in every raikan, and only when the sensor reading and the memorised data matched could 66.G, or any of its comrades, be certain of having located the ethereal.

A blip moved across its target area: a series of energy emissions and guela-signature fuel traces moving quickly eastwards. The drone narrow focused on the reading and performed a detailed analysis. From the available data and scant vehicular information stored within its record matrices, 66.G postulated that it had discovered a land speeder, a low-tech human skimmer vehicle, and transmitted its discovery to the parent node on the *Ores Tashvar*. A minor sensory fluctuation in the reading caused it some perplexity; an apparent Line Warrior energy signature that oscillated between invisibility and a warning-red state of crisis. Orbsat 66.G checked off the identifier-code against Shasartol records and found it earmarked for immediate broadcast. Accordingly, the drone forwarded its bizarre findings to OUDass staff and awaited a response.

Below it the planets terminator rolled enormously onwards, a blur-edged sweep of sunless shadow grinding its way forwards as day segued into night.

OUDass personnel responded quickly with a request for possible destinations of the guela vehicle. The surveillance drone tilted fractionally to train its central optic upon the contrivance and then, locking its direction of travel into a cluster of auto-reactive gyroscopes, panned ahead in a broad extension of the journey.

The foothills of a range of jagged mountains, like rotten teeth in the maw of a rogue kroothound, loomed ahead. Orbsat 66.G flicked through a sequence of filters routinely, not expecting to find anything.

Something flared phosphor-bright across its artificial consciousness.

East, ElLusha! We have a fix!

What? Who is this?

Sir, this is UiGortyl. We spoke earlier.

The faulty sensors, yes?

Uh

Right. What do you want? Im up to my optic-cluster in the enemy here.

My apologies, Shasel. Its just you wanted to know about LaKais.

Youve found him?

Weve picked up the phantom signal again. It could be him we cant be certain. But theres something else

Where is he?

Well, thats just it Hes heading east. We think hes travelling in a guela transport.

That doesnt make any sense.

I know, Shasel, but We postulated a destination and found something.

Oh?

Theres an energy spike bigger than anything weve ever seen. OUdas believes weve found the enemy headquarters.

And the ethereal?

A faint reading, but its definitely him.

East, you say?

Correct. Go with the tauva, Shasel.

* * * * *

There was a reckoning coming. Kais gritted his teeth and stared ahead to the jagged spinal-chord of the mountains on the horizon.

Ardias said Ardias said he knew where to find the enemy base. He said he was taking them there.

He said hed wipe away this man, Severus, and end the madness and that Kais, if he had to, could tag along.

He said hed kill him if he got in his way. Kais was inclined to believe him.

The tight-skinned concentration of the Marines features, hawkish face scarred and frozen in a permanent frown of martial intensity, filled Kais with a strange sort of assurance. So little in his world now seemed reliable, but to even question this mans metal-clad resolve was unthinkable. The humans *focus*, despite being bent upon conflict and triumph rather than unity and equilibrium, was equal to any that hed encountered in members of the tau

race.

Unity and Equilibrium and Progress and Growth

Important words. Tenets of faith.

Ardias said Ardias said faith would sustain him. Ardias said faith was the only shield Chaos couldnt penetrate.

Kais plucked the display wafer from his pocket too exhausted and bloodied to care about exposing the tiny rectangle of words that he was so careful to conceal. The jagged characters were like old friends or enemies, perhaps each line and curving inflection as familiar as his own face.

It began: *My son*. Somehow the familiarity of the phrase went against Kaiss ingrained impression of his father, as if to even accept such a base thing as having a flesh relative was below the idealistic grandeur Shiur had espoused in life.

Then four lines of text:

No expansion without equilibrium.

No conquest without control.

Pursue success in serenity

And service to the tauva.

Military and focused and balanced and graceful, everything a Fire Warrior should be. Elegant but not excessive. Ambitious but moderated by knowledge of ones limitations. It was efficient.

Below it, nestled beneath the freeform meditation like a thorn hidden within a perfect petal, the display wafer said: *With pride*.

Kais told himself: Dont think about it. Not now.

Dont think about the eyes. The big, dark eyes. Overshadowed by straight-edged brows, framed by sweeping cheek bones and underscored, like a grammatical emphasis, by the rule-straight gash of his mouth.

Dont think about the disappointment. Dont think about the silence of the battledome all those taucyrs ago as that diamond-tipped gaze, so full of disenchanted melancholia, regarded you and skewered you and made you bleed inside.

Dont think about his words.

His dedication to the tauva is commendable, I daresay? He excels?

Dont think about the shasvre, stammering for a dignified response when all he wanted to say was: No. He struggles. He has no place here.

Dont think about OShiur at all. Think of something else.

Dont think about never having had the chance to prove to him to show him, for all time that yes, I am your son! I am worthy of your blood!

Dont think about him dying, battlesuit shredded by tyranid talons, body exposed and bleeding like a curled limpet prised apart by a resourceful carrion crow. Dont think about him dying in the sure and certain knowledge

that his son his one hope of lasting legacy, his one gift to the machine that would last beyond the passing of his own self was flawed.

Dont think about it!

Whats that? The Space Marines voice was like granite, exploding apart his reverie. He realised he was clutching the wafer so tight one corner was cracking, twisting the words with fluid amorphousness. Twisting the last piece of purity in his world, just as everything before it had crumbled or corrupted or faltered.

Nothing, he said, words strained. Nothing youd understand.

Hm.

The silence, if one could call it that, resumed. Beyond sighing at the asthmatic spluttering of the vehicles engine and grunting at the occasional roar of friction as the nose dipped to grind against the desert shale, neither said a word. Ardias piloted the craft with unwavering absorption and Kais wondered vaguely, relieved to be distracted from the clamour of guilt and rage bubbling just below the surface of his mind, if the Marine, like him, was trawling through his memories for some way of explaining this rotas insanity.

Nothing would come. Nothing had prepared him for this.

Combat itself had been a poisoned chalice: an intoxicating blend of fears and violences; at first terrifying and new, then dizzying and joyful and then, finally, regaining something of its terror at the realisation of that same joy.

It was like discovering he had a talent for murder.

It was like finding out he was a skilled butcher.

It was like coming to terms with a natural enjoyment of horror.

It was like

Except Except it wasnt like any of those things.

He did have a talent for murder. He was a skilled butcher.

He did enjoy the horror and the carnage and the violence. The tauva had never prepared him for that. The display wafer in his hand was laughing at him (the Montau devil said so, and hadnt it served him well before?).

The insanity crawled along his spine and into his mouth and said:

Havent we been triumphant?

Havent I saved you and gloried in you and made you a hero?

Havent I guided you just when you needed me?

Havent I made you excel, just like you always wanted?

It said:

What would you do, Shasla Tau Kais? What would you say if the old man, the old general, the old tired morsel of gristle and flesh with his imperious eyes and his holier-than-thou sneer, was here now?

What would you say to your father, little Fire Warrior?

Kais curled his knuckles around the display wafer and slowly, enjoying every raikan, cracked it into two jagged pieces.

If Ardias noticed he gave no indication, angling the speeder towards the humped shadows of the evening hills and extending a finger.

There, he said.

Over the next rise, depressed into the ground like a mighty bullet wound with jagged rock edges and black obelisks standing guard over its depths, a pit opened up into the guts of the world. A mighty disc of rock, covered in the spidery etchings of some ancient, alien hand, lay crumbled and discarded nearby. Walkways and ramps wove downwards from the surface, vanishing along tunnels that wormed their way into the exposed soil like arteries.

Im ready, Kais said, more to himself than the Space Marine.

The land speeder slowed to a spasmodic halt and the two warriors stepped out onto the sand.

The Montau devil unsheathed its claws and prepared itself for the end.

The seven-pointed star throbbed hungrily, daemonic light racing along its vertices, creaking like a melting iceberg. Severus allowed the energy to build within his soul, a cinder point of heat that quickly grew to needle-sharp intensity. He resisted the urge to cry out.

The chanting reached its crescendo, rising to a chorus of resonant voices. Briefly the disjointed mantras of each chaos priest overlapped and reflected one another, lifting to a natural zenith. The floor of the temple pit radiated a sickly light, illuminating the four compass point shrines set at each corner.

One for each god of the major Chaos Arcana.

Nurgle.

Slaanesh.

Khorne.

Tzeentch.

Tarkhax, warp preserve his malevolent name, would make obeisance to them all. His sustenance was derived from the Changer of Ways Tzeentch but he was a being of rare cunning and understood the importance of union. By supplicating to each of the Dark Gods he would be gifted with strengths and powers beyond the remit of his sorcerous patron, sealing his ascension and anchoring him, immovably, into the realm of mortality and material.

It appeared to be working.

The plague priest to Severuss left shrieked, fluids dribbling copiously from its hood, dropped its gnarled cane and scrabbled at its own chest, apparently arresting the spread of an intolerable fire that only it could see or feel. It gave a final pitiful squeal of agony and broke apart, scabrous residue

splattering to the floor in a torrent of decayed flesh and bile.

The shrine to Nurgles pestilent pleasures, at the periphery of Severuss view, illuminated with a vomit-green cast, bloated statue idol staring mutely.

Slaaneshs hooded painbringer cried out next, pied cloak seeming to constrict and dissect its wearer, dissolving the figure with acidic slowness. The thing screamed and groaned in equal measure as its flesh peeled away.

Then the butcher priest of Khorne, erupting in a column of writhing flesh and blood, like chunks of abattoir meat.

Then Tzeentchs sorcerer-devotee, amorphous form shifting and melding with growing speed until it oscillated and flexed alarmingly, breaking down in fluid disarray to dribble and puddle on the floor like melted ice.

As each priest willingly if painfully gave their life, the terrible features of their patron idol statue, constructed millennia ago before Tarkhaxs imprisonment, was cast in the ruddy light of its vile deity.

Four shrines of darkness and death.

The two prisoners had lost consciousness long ago, slumping against their restraints to hang limply, wrists bleeding at the tightness of their bonds. Severus dismissed them from his mind and concentrated on the surging warp-tides in his skull.

Only he remained to witness the final stage of Tarkhaxs release.

A surge of energy formed from the centre of the star; a glowing spine of blue white plasma that lifted high above the abyss, penetrating the clouds above and rising: a shifting spirit beacon to welcome the daemonlord back to reality.

Severus glanced at his timepiece again. 18.59 hrs. Twenty minutes left.

Tunnel gave way to tunnel. Catacomb to crypt. Withered chamber to spiral stairs. Always downwards, air growing thicker and greasier with every step, slurry underfoot growing more and more sludgelike. Like wading in glue.

Descend here, Ardias had said, pointing to one slipramp that coiled its way over the lip of the abyss and into the darkness. Ill find another route we have more chance of recovering the prisoners this way. Do what you can. Keep them busy, make a diversion. Severus is mine.

Hed racked his gun meaningfully, nodded once with something similar to professional respect, then jogged away across the blasted landscape, disappearing from view behind the coils of sulphurous smoke and jagged rock. A labyrinth of walkways and tunnels peppered the plunging surfaces within the pit: choosing to begin from opposite sides seemed to make the most sense.

Kais simply couldnt bring himself to care.

Once every few raikors his mind would remind him insidiously, he

thought of the ethereal Kovash languishing somewhere below. But all consideration of goal or purpose was quickly eclipsed behind the hissing of the rage in his mind, storming and shrieking, hunting down enemies to pulverise. Just as his descent was measured in a coagulation of the air and an impalpable sense of growing monstrousness, so too did the Montau-whisper flourish. With every torlek he walked, it grew louder, more urgent

Killing was his reason, now. Violence was his rationality, carnage his sanctity. Equilibrium found in disharmony.

The walls moaned at him, half-formed somethings twisting and sucking at the moist earth; repugnant embryos locked in amniotic sacs of filth and disease. Kais had already exploded some, just for the sake of it. The exercise lacked gratification. Hed found gibbering daemon things and Chaos Marines instead: real prey that ran or fought back or at least reacted satisfyingly when he punched high-velocity munitions through their leering toothy faces.

He imagined how he must look now. A shadow thing of muck and flesh. Human blood going rust-brown as it dried across his armour, oily Chaos fluids staining him with an unclean patina, the asymmetry of his armour compounded by the ragged wounds and scars hed received. His helmet was a misshapen cyclops visage, the single baleful eye of the bolter shell glowering down from above his brow.

The railgun had ceased to be a thing of grace and cleanliness long, long ago. Now it hung with chunks of gore, matted hair and filth staining every surface, viscous liquids dribbling slowly from beneath its stock.

Vhol, fastidious in his care of technology, would not approve.

If, that is, he was still alive.

If anyone Kais knew was still alive.

As if it mattered.

He rushed across a walkway that arched unexpectedly across the chasm of the pit, uncomfortable at the exposure. A bright blue lance of light, like an inverted sunray, punctured the abyssal airspace from below. He resisted the urge to look down into the murky depths and moved on, fingering the railguns trigger hungrily, waiting for a target.

As if to answer some unspoken prayer a shriek rang out from nearby: a protracted shrill of avian fury. Kais spun in his spot, gun raised and ready, a guilty smile smearing itself across his face.

There were two, and they came at him together. Sleek perversions of the hulking Chaos Marines, their aerodynamic bodies tapered into fluted talons that snapped apart mechanically and grasped for him as they dropped from above. Like swooping vultures, arcane jet packs disgorging a miasmic haze of fuel and smog, they ululated as they plummeted, slicing through the air with scalpel precision. Ducking hardly seemed worth it. He did it anyway.

A claw parted the flesh of his shoulder like jelly, making him cry out. The impact dragged him forwards and briefly he was certain of tumbling over the edge of the walkway, flailing downwards into the pit. But the raptor thing was gone in a flash, a sticky trail of cyan blood hanging threadlike in the air behind it, and Kais had just enough presence of mind, even through the haze of pain, to tumble aside as the second shrieking creature gusted past to finish the job.

Its talons expecting the soft bite of flesh instead clawed impotently at the slippery rock of the walkway and sent the creature toppling forwards, overbalancing with a shriek. Kais pumped a vengeful railgun shot into its tumbling back, ignoring the pain in his shoulder, and watched with no small satisfaction as its jetpack ignited messily.

It rained corrupted blood.

The surviving raptor howled indignantly above; a babyshriek eulogy for its dead comrade. It came at Kais in a flurry, knife claws an iridescent smear of reflected light, fluted wedge beak keening and howling. He watched it with something like fascination, drawing himself up to his full height like a cat arching its back, and didnt raise his gun until the thing was almost upon him, yowling and screaming in fury.

Kais knew how it felt.

He fired and dropped onto his back in one smooth motion, senses too overburdened to pick out any confirmation of his shot having found its target. The dagger-like shape rocketed past overhead, more felt than seen, flashing claws dangerously close. His stomach turned over with the frustration of failure, his enemy still very much alive. A slick confetti of debris and fluids followed it past, and Kais rolled onto his front to prepare for the inevitable follow-up attack.

The shrieking stopped. Hed been on target after all.

Trailing streamers of flesh, the raptors sleek descent became a chaotic stall, limbs flailing and jetpack coughing. It mashed itself against the pit-wall and tumbled, in several pieces, into the gloom below.

Kais lay still, breathing heavily, until the last ruinous metal-on-stone clang resonated from below. The echoes died away, the sultry atmosphere of the pit flourished again. He pulled himself to his feet, clenching his teeth against the pain in his shoulder, and stumbled onwards. It seemed as good a direction as any, now.

Melphea Turneus Borik sank to his knees and groaned.

The warp was a grey mist in his skull, a textured stream of smoke and shadows, illuminated from an impossible distance by the frail light of the Astronomican. He was used to its flux and whimsy, to the malevolence of the

things that lived there and the sensory abstraction that was the reality of the empyrean but now now something had changed.

Something irresistible, like a great black leviathan disgorging its slime-slick flanks from some oceanic abyss, lurked on the edge of his perception and pushed. It was a hungry force, clawing and chittering to escape, certain of its imminent liberation. Borik clutched his fingers to his face and gurgled, fighting to breathe. He could feel his attendants and novitiae clamouring round, trying to restrain him, anxious for his wellbeing. Unable to see them in a conventional sense, to Borik they seemed galaxies away.

Hed been sightless since his thirteenth year. Since they dragged him, wailing and screaming, from the nuke-slums of Caer Malafori in a mutebox containment vessel. Since they bundled him into the cavernous spaces and tortured chambers of the Blackship *Lamentation* of the Adepta Astra Telepathica. Sightless since his soul was melted and bonded with the being of the Most Holy Emperor, since he screamed and screamed for three days during the ceremony, since the pain broke every bone in his hands and left his eyes pooling away like melted metal.

Hed been sightless since his graduation as an astropath: a psychic messenger-conduit able to span the interstellar vastness separating Imperial worlds, ships, stations and outposts. Stationed within the Oraclitus Meditarium aboard the Retribution-class battlecruiser *Purgatus*, no more than a comm-call from the bridge, Borik had served his Emperor-God for twenty-nine years. By astropath standards, he was ancient. But this force, this malignant presence threatening to birth itself into the local warp, this was something hed never felt before.

His attendants lifted him reverently, as befitted his status, onto his meditation pallet. He barely felt their hands. His scrying mind struggled to identify the presence, reasoning that information would be the greatest weapon in the face of an unknown threat. The warp being seemed cut off, separated from conventional empyrean by a membranous prison that, even as Borik watched, grew thin and weblike, breaking down inexorably.

The thing, the daemon thing, noticed him.

Its howls stopped abruptly, silence sucking at Boriks awareness. And slowly, like a cancer exploring the vastness of its host body, it turned its ethereal gaze upon him.

Little mind it hissed, voice coiling with insidious fire and silk, little mind I see you

Borik stammered, tongue clumsy and heavy in his mouth. G-get back Somewhere far away, in the mundanity of reality, his attendants frowned and backed away, respecting their masters wishes.

Little mind. Im *huuuuungry*

Boriks panicked defences, telepathically erected fortress walls and mindbomb ghost chaff, were woefully late. Stretching out its talons of molten warpstuff through the crumbling walls of its prison, the Daemon-lord Tarkhax snatched up the shivering spirit morsel and guzzled it whole.

Sooooon it shrieked into the churning ether, overjoyed at the taste of a mortals soul after so many long years. Its words echoed silently amongst the vacant expanses that now comprised the brain of Melphea Turneus Borik.

Wh What do you want with me? the ethereal asked weakly, briefly regaining consciousness.

Severus giggled and lifted the struggling alien into the air with a wave of his hand, coruscating energies holding it there, immobile.

What have you got? he said.

His vision blurred.

A carpet of slurry and sewage gurgled and slurped beneath him, sending him careening along the slippery tunnel slide with no hope of slowing or stopping. The walls, insipid white rock given an organic undulation by millennia of draining filth, made his grasping attempts to arrest the descent futile.

Somewhere way above, at the sinkholes mouth, the last echoes of exploding ammunition filtered downwards, making the tunnel shake. A hulking Chaos monstrosity, limbs dribbling with viscous flesh that could writhe and reshape into a multitude of heavy weapons, had blocked his path like a sneering ogre, gun barrels slurping out of its elbows and shoulders. A well-aimed pair of grenades and some cautious long-distance targeting had blown open the fleshy shell, exposing an unnatural fusion of metal and liquid within, ragged clumps of ammo and high explosives forming with moist alacrity, like melting wax seen in reverse.

Hed thrown caution to the wind, dangerous impetuosity filling him with a Montau thrill, and darted forwards through the blossoming bolter craters and thrumming lascannon rounds to drop a phosphor flare into the wound, wet edges sucking like a toothless mouth at his arm, then forced his aching legs to dive aside.

The look on the twisted creatures face as it realised what was coming had bubbled up in Kaiss throat as a stifled chuckle. Hed braced himself inwardly, expecting the joyful sentiment to arrive accompanied, as ever, by the secret guilt at having an untaulike thought.

But he was beyond that, now.

Before he could even contemplate finding some cover from the colossal detonation the ground had liquefied with a syrupy slurp, sending him

tumbling with a cry into the slippery sinkhole bowels of the chamber. Here, at the heart of a daemon-temple, even the rock of the walls and floor was capable of treachery.

Missing out on the ogres undoubtedly messy destruction had galled him immensely.

Slime polyps and froth-specked effluvium further pronounced the filth of his armour, seeping into the fiodr of his regs and leaving his wounded leg and slashed shoulder throbbing with the certainty of poisoned infection. He couldnt allow himself the time to worry about it now, and bit on his lip to take his mind off the pain.

And then the rushing tunnel walls were gone, gravity took a hold of his body, and the sinkhole spat him out like a gobbet of spittle. He landed awkwardly in a lake of sludge which bubbled and gurgled violently at his touch, rolling to stand upright with fluids and froth dribbling from beneath his arms and legs.

The chamber seemed to go on forever. A foetid mist hung above the mire, cloying at his senses and filling him with soporific gloom, shifting and ghosting around him.

Whats the point? the smog seemed to say, tendrils of musky haze stroking against his exposed flesh. *Best to give up now Lie down Ease yourself for a while*

His knees started to weaken.

Thats it

Just for a short while

The lake is so warm

He felt his eyelids grow heavy and couldnt for the life of him think of any reason why he should try to keep them open.

Yessss

But then there was something else. A smell, perhaps, or a feeling. Conducted through his tastebuds and his nasal orifice, seeping into his ears and eyes. Not like any sense at all; just a certainty that built from the core of his bones outwards into his skin that somewhere, somewhere nearby, was someone important.

He remembered feeling peace, once. He could feel it again now: the first tentative echoes of that great focus hed known, if only he could remember when and why. He could feel the glimmerings of serenity, unnaturally imposed but embraced nonetheless. Hed felt the peace and the awe and the security before, when for a few short raikors hed been in the presence of

Of

Kovash!

The sound of his own voice startled him, chasing away the delirium and

fatigue that the smoggy air draped across his senses and convincing him, somehow, that Aunel Tau Kovash was nearby.

His mind cleared, as fresh water rushing across a muck-encrusted jewel, and he squared his shoulders and set off in the direction in which he guessed no, that he knew he'd find the ethereal.

Severus glared at the pale figure and snarled. Alien!

It didn't respond, deeply ensconced in whatever trance or meditation it was mumbling. Severus wrinkled his nose, troubled by something he couldn't quite put into words, and tried again.

Alien! What are you doing?

Again, nothing. Briefly, Severus considered the possibility of some hitherto unknown psychic ability possessed by the tau, but he reassured himself with a sneer. As the minutes counted away to the moment of Tarkhax's release, the governor found his control over the dark powers growing ever stronger. An aura of crackling energy, a shifting halo of smoke and shadow, had formed around him, and now he could see into the coiling realm of the warp with as much ease as opening his eyes. This xenogen morsel hanging in the air was no psyker; no warp-sighted mutant that could cry out to its comrades for help. In fact, Severus was rapidly coming to the conclusion that the ethereal was of very little value whatsoever. The possibility of tainting a high-ranking tau had been worth exploring at least, he reassured himself: that it had failed merely assured their utter annihilation. Chaos had little time for incorruptibility.

Pursing his lips thoughtfully, and absent-mindedly waving away an exotic scent that briefly teased against his nostrils, he glared at the alien and slipped his jewelled dagger from its scabbard.

The Montau devil was scrambling Kaiss brains, an insidious whisper from within his own blood. Focus was the key. He remembered that from another time. He remembered the scent and presence of the ethereal.

Focus.

Unity.

Be one with the tauva.

There was always something else to kill, as he descended further and further into the earth. Always something else to attack him, driving a wedge of despair and fury further into his brain.

There was no use in the snot, now. No use in parroting the empty promises and propaganda of the porhui media. No use in meditations and chants and lessons. No hope of rediscovering the path the One Path into the light and serenity of the tauva. He'd strayed too far. He'd lost his way.

He thought: I've failed.

The Trial by Fire was intended to separate the elite from the adequate. There was no shame in missing out on a progression of rank. It was all a question of niche. Pass the trial and advance to the next rank. Don't pass it and be content with your place.

Kais had no niche.

He killed with too much skill, he realised with a jolt, almost laughing at the ridiculousness of the paradox. He gloried in devastation and violence where no excess of emotion was encouraged or allowed. He was too good at what he did.

The grizzled shasvre from his youth in the battle-dome had seen it, all those long taucyrs ago. Even at that early age, Kais realised, his future had been set in stone:

Given to tempers the instructor had said, stammering on his words in the face of OShiurs unforgiving glare. Changes in mood and focus.

Flawed. Useless. Inefficient.

He remembered the shame, burning in his cheeks and brain. The shasvres damning words were all the more dreadful for the inescapable truth they contained.

Kaiss didactic memories told him that the guela, innumerable populations smeared like a great plague across the galaxy, made full use of the insane and the volatile amongst them: presenting them with weapons, forming them into asylum legions and hurling them, like expendable human chaff, into the jaws of an enemy. They might die. It wouldn't matter.

But maybe, the guela philosophy went, maybe one or two would prove so unhinged, so insane and unattainable, that they'd turn the tide of a war.

Using the deranged as sacrificial weapons: Kais could think of few uglier and more exploitative concepts. Except Except hadn't his commanders relied upon him? Hadn't ElLusha told him he was the only one who could do this?

Werent the tau just as bad?

A new bubble of bitterness and resentment welled up in his mind and burst obscenely, splattering his consciousness with its acid. They'd used him. They'd known he was damned, known he'd self-destruct, known he was lost to the guiding beacon of the tauva

And they'd used him nonetheless.

The Montau rage gobbled up the bitterness with relish and hunted hungrily for something to kill. *Anything*.

* * * * *

The desert rushed past, every grav-leap a colossal stride into the air. Sand

became shale; a desolate wash of crumbled earth and stone pouring like a desiccated sea from the foothills.

Lusha landed and leaped in one motion, clouds of dust rising around his suits chassis then falling away within moments.

Shasel one of the team commed, voice exhausted. Were falling behind!

Lusha ignored them, paying little attention to the three icons receding into the distance behind him on his HUD, unwilling to waste any time. A bright blue light, pulsing unnaturally, writhing like some luminous tentacle, hung immobile over the hills: a jagged pillar of energy. He stared at it in bewilderment, wondering what malefic event the beacons presence presaged.

Returning his mind to the journey, he fed every last scrap of energy he could muster into the suits motors and leaped again. Kais was in there, somewhere. Alone.

The sun began to set behind him.

Someone moaned nearby, a drawn-out groan of fear and pain that echoed airily throughout the moist catacomb. Kais racked the railgun with a metal-on-metal snarl and twisted to face the sound, feet splashing in the muck of the chambers floor.

It was the grey-haired admiral from the guela ship, and, as plain as the nose on his face, he was mad.

Little nn little tau he giggled, spotting Kais through the drifting murk-haze. Come here. Mm. Come close.

That the human had been twisted by his ordeal was beyond doubt. His naval robes were stained and torn, damp with clotted blood and Chaos sludge. Half his hair was gone, a ragged patchwork of burns and cuts riddling the bald scalp beneath. He rolled on the floor and chuckled and muttered to himself, clawing at his eyes every few moments. Behind him a valve-like doorway clenched shut, circular muscles contracting wetly.

The human pulled himself into a half-upright crouch and coughed thickly.

Kais circled cautiously, fighting the desire to open fire regardless of what the scrawny creature had to say. The railgun seemed to warm in his hands, straining at his trigger finger slyly.

Where is the Aun? he said, quivering with the effort of restraint.

Closer, yes. Come close now. I I have things to tell you. You have to listen.

Kais sidestepped closer, never letting the gun muzzle falter from its target. If the admiral was uncomfortable at staring down a muzzle he gave no indication of it, bloodshot eyes seeming exhausted and old.

Ive seen such things the man gurgled, scratching at one eyelid with an ungentle hand. Things to to Things you cant imagine. he began to laugh, a

damp and frail giggle that descended into a rasp of air. Now look at us he hissed. Emperor save us: our last hope riding on an alien On a filthy little tau! he threw back his head and laughed maniacally, great gouts of hilarity that quickly turned to sobs. He collapsed back onto the ground and heaved dry air, coughing and spluttering pathetically.

To Kais, he seemed as threatening as a one-taucyr youngling. Even with the rage gusting furiously through his blood the idea of shooting this defenceless thing was repugnant. He lowered his gun and slouched forwards, inquisitive.

The effect upon the human was electric. It jerked into a rigid crouch, face changing abruptly, stabbing out with the heel of its hand, fingers splayed.

Stop! it cried, voice suddenly losing its guttural unnaturalness. Dont come closer! Its trying to nn The man rolled onto his back, flexing furiously, spasming and dribbling and clawing at his own face. Getoutgetoutgetout!

Kais knew little of the ways of humans his tutors had instructed him from an early age to think of them as a galaxy-wide pestilence, only dimly sentient and far from embracing the credo of the tauva. But still, to his unpracticed eyes, it seemed like the admiral was struggling with some dark part of himself.

Kais could relate to that. He re-aimed the railgun and forced himself to stop shaking.

Get out! the man shrieked, punching himself in the eye. Get back to the w nn J-just words, little tau. Feeling better now. Come closer. Thats it No! Stay back! Two voices, two faces, struggling and battering at one another viciously. Eventually the man slumped, exhausted, and lifted a tired face to stare at Kais.

There he panted, I-I think its under control

What is? Kais growled, needing little additional encouragement to squeeze his trigger.

Constantine bowed his head, breathing deep. They they changed me. Opened me up to oh, God-Emperor preserve me.

The man began to sob again. Kais took aim and began to tighten his finger, mouth a hard, tight line inside his helmet. *Call it mercy*, he thought.

Wait! the guela hissed, raising a shaky arm. Not yet. I have to tell you! You need to know

Tell me what, human? All I want is the ethereal. Youre in my way.

More important than that!

What, then?

How to stop the Darkness!

The thing had no name, as such.

It was a minor being, by the standards of its kind, and it had never tasted the hard-edged paradise that was reality. It had lived out eternity as a coiling warp urge, a disembodied malevolence that hungered yearned for the seductive glory of materiality. The way had been opened.

A soul had been corrupted and twisted, burst into myriad shreds and left to gape open: an enticing entrance for any of the countless warp things that watched and waited. It was a light, a radiance of promise and power that the daemon minds had chattered and fought over, struggling to reach first.

Alone amongst billions, it had triumphed.

Inexperienced, still unfamiliar with the strange body it had entered, it found the host mind pushing back at it with annoying strength. It had plundered the things memories for information: it called itself human, it had discovered, a shrivelled flesh morsel called Constantine. It had struggled against the warp minds incursion and now, of all the ignominy, had pushed it aside!

It was talking to some alien thing nearby, its words a meaningless prattle. Furious, the warp mind coiled itself into a ball and flexed, pushing all of its countless millennia of frustration and torment into that one daggerlike surge of consciousness.

The humans mind broke like thin ice. The warp thing explored its new body quickly and decided, with a sneer, to make some changes.

* * * * *

Y-you understand? The shrines! Remember!

I remember, Kais grunted, impatient with the guelas gibbering. Its voice grew weaker with every word, eyes rolling into its skull.

Its its coming he gurgled, suddenly terrified.

What is? Kais glanced around the catacombs for any approaching enemy. None seemed forthcoming.

Constantine retched, then *shifted*.

His jaw distended obscenely, chin lurching forwards, mouth ratcheting open with a creak. His eyes sunk back into his head, pain-twisted orbs rolling and taking on an angry red lustre. Blood oozed copiously from his mouth, writhing upwards in mutiny against gravity, spreading out thin fingertips of fluid to consume the mans entire head. His skull splintered with a dry *crack*.

His uniform ripped, moist fabric hanging briefly in the murky air. What bubbled and pulsed up from beneath the gaudy robes was far from human.

Kais backed away. The blood cocoon surrounding the mans head cracked like an egg, reptile flesh revealed beneath, glowing with scaled luminescence. Black and blue tiger stripes undulated across red cheeks; themselves stretched

into a beaklike maw, stippled with tiny teeth that bulged and hinged like insect legs.

The creature snapped its jaws together and dragged a long tongue into its eye to clean off the powdery residue of dried blood, gangly legs lifting it upright. It arched its back and leathery wings unfurled magnificently a halo of tattered flesh and bone.

Kais didnt need any further encouragement. He opened fire with a snarl.

The shell knocked the obscenity onto its back in a fountain of bone and gore, dust and smoke hanging around it as its flesh charred. It yowled in pain and lay still, taloned claws clutching rigidly at nothing. For a second Kais thought hed destroyed it and the killing rage in his mind chuckled and whispered its congratulatory poison.

You can kill anything.

You are a god.

The corpse jerked upright, tilted its head, and screamed.

Kais staggered backwards, astonished, rocked by the force of the howl, clutching impotently at his ears and unable to block the audio-pickup from his helmet. The world wobbled on its axis, blurring in his mind, making his teeth rattle and his skull ache. Before he knew what was happening he was on his back, vaulted catacomb ceiling looming over. He shook his head to clear the haze and tried to move his arms, tried to rise up, tried to lift his gun but

But the beast was on him, pinning him like a kroot hound, muscle chords straining beneath the dry sandpaper rasp of its skin. The railgun had blasted a hole straight through its midriff, a needle-eye that dangled shredded viscera upon Kaiss chest and emptied awful fluids across his armour. An aborted spinal chord dangled limply inside the wound, the beasts legs uselessly dragging behind it.

His gun was gone, somewhere. Knocked aside in the rush.

A memory swelled abstractly from his mind. He remembered the first time hed been given a lesson in hand-to-hand fighting, during the first taucyr of his training. The instructor had stared his young charges up and down and said, with no sense of irony at all:

The first rule of unarmed combat is: dont be unarmed.

Too late for that. He wrestled to move but the creatures grip was too strong, bony dagger claws scraping into his arms, slicing at his flesh and leaving his armour shredded.

It pushed its head, equine features surmounted by tall bone antlers of velvet and chitin, down upon Kaiss helmet, tongue slurping obscenely around the connector joints, searching for a way in.

Kais thought, with crystal clarity: *Im going to die.*

Kill me, if you must, the ethereal said calmly. My people will retaliate and crush you to dust.

Severus giggled, idly dragging the tip of the blade across the taus flesh, enjoying the pale blue whorls and patterns it opened up in its wake.

The Aun, pinioned by invisible forces in the air, hadn't cried out once, so far. These things, these tau, they were simply *no fun*.

Severus glanced at his timepiece.

Ten minutes.

tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock he muttered, grinning at the tau, then laughed like he'd said the funniest thing in the world. The voice in his head was so loud, now, that he couldn't honestly say which of the two consciousnesses had been there first of all.

Snarling, the daemon-thing lifted a claw from Kais arm and scrabbled at his helmet, perplexed by its inability to get at his head.

Wannnnntt to eeet your eeeyes it hissed, voice barely understandable beneath a drizzle of sputum and blood.

Finding himself with one arm free, Kais scrabbled for a weapon. His gun was out of reach, his knife holstered at his other hip, pressed down by the weight of his enemy. Seeing no other options, he pushed his fist directly into the cavernous wound in its guts, grabbed a handful of slippery vertebrae, and pulled.

It roared. It roared and squealed and shrieked, muscles spasming and arms twitching, tortured nerves sending contradictory messages through its unnatural form. It tried rising with its enormous wings, a thick blood sludge vomiting from its maw across Kais optics, but couldn't control their leathery beating. It jerked and twitched and snarled, forever howling with enough force to shudder Kais very brain, but he held on to the brutalised spine with all his dwindling strength, and twisted.

He realised, without any surprise, that he was shrieking and howling just as much as his enemy.

Finally, mercifully, the beast flopped to one side in a tangle of rictus-stiff limbs and matted gore. Kais hand was wrapped around the pommel of his knife and tensing before his mind was even fully recovered from its exertions. The Montau insanity raised his arm, fed it with all of his remaining strength and brought it down in a glimmering arc.

The Chaos beasts head sagged from its body with a wet rasp. The thing rustled as it died.

As if responding to some invisible signal, the circular doorway opened slowly, sphincter-muscles relaxing obscenely.

Kais stared out at the very base of the Temple abyss.

Ardias sunk his chainsword into the Traitor Marines guts with something like relish. In all the galaxy, of all the myriad enemies that clustered around the frail light of humanity, nothing was as satisfying to purge, he thought, as a traitor.

The thing gurgled a blasphemous oath, shuddered as its guts flopped out of its armour shell, and lay still. Ardias stooped to catch his breath and took a look around the chamber.

Just another crypt, one among dozens, lined with moistness and filth, vague suggestions of organic forms jutting from its walls and slurping doorways pulsing every few moments. If he came out of this alive, by the grace of the Primarch, hed take great pleasure in overseeing an orbital bombardment of this place.

His descent was taking far too long. Perhaps hed taken a wrong turn, or lost his bearings amongst the snaking corridors and stairways that hed travelled, unable to tell which would wend its way back towards the shaft of the abyss, and which coiled endlessly away into the rock and soil of the earth. It was true that his sensors and compass readings were scrambled and confused by whatever foul energies riddled the pit, but hed served the Emperors glory long enough to learn to rely upon his own senses just as much as those of his battle armour. Being lost meant someone was messing with his mind.

Tau, he voxed, uncomfortable at the thought. Tau are you there?

Ardias? came the stammered reply, thick with interference. Is that you?

Of course it is. Where are you? Are you near the bottom?

The alien sounded changed, somehow; laughing grimly before answering. Not near it, human. At it.

Ardias blinked, surprised yet again by the taus resourcefulness. Delpheuss dying prediction, it would seem, had been correct.

He was just wondering what orders to give the xenogen when the dead Chaos Marine decided it wasnt dead at all and rose up with a roar.

Ardias, as if from a distance, heard shots, the tinny impart of bolter shells against his armour, the final abortive crackle of the vox-line being severed

And a sharp pain exploded in his mind.

Everything went black.

Although every conceptual philosophy he had absorbed as a youth told him to scorn such fanciful observations, Shasel Tau Lusha stood at the edge of the pit and recognised *evil*. Stretching in a wide bowl, nestled like some unhealed wound in the crux of three flint-covered foothills, the sweeping camber of its lip gave way to an uneven shaft some fifty torleks across. A curtain of black

fumes and unnatural stinks rose from the abyss like the emissions of a pestilent volcano, detectable even within the confines of the battlesuit. A network of walkways, gouged roughly from the walls of the shaft, turned inwards like mutant ganglia to penetrate the rock itself and vanish into the gloom: bore holes that glowed with green and blue light.

Lusha found himself reciting litanies and siot meditations without even thinking. Lessons to bring serenity to his mind, lessons to restore him to equilibrium, lessons to stave off the horror of excess and selfishness, lessons to reaffirm the superiority of the tauva.

By the path he mumbled, astonished at the vastness of the desolation.

Chittering daemon things, like carrion crows, were gathering in a black pall above the abyss, orbiting the flexing blue-white pillar of energy that rose up from deep underground. Its lightning-bolt gesticulations punctured the very clouds and became fluted and spoutlike, segueing into the sky and sucking at the eye somehow, slurping everything into it little by little.

Lusha wondered vaguely where it led.

His team cast long shadows across the lip of the abyss, the sinking sun painting the sky a piebald red. Like splattered blood.

ElLusha VreTongata commed. Ive found something.

The shasvres suit drifted forwards, mandible fingers extended and holding something small. It was lying on the floor, he explained.

ElLusha mentally commanded his own digits to unfold from their protective sheaths and watched with interest as Tongata tipped two fragments of display wafer into his grip.

Placed side by side, it was just possible to make out the cracked message.

Oh, he whispered, beginning to understand. Oh, Kais

What is it, Shasel?

He looked back round at the pit, swollen darkness gathering around it like anti-light. It is a reason, Shasvre.

A long range comm warning chimed peacefully, interrupting his thoughts.

Shasel? This is the *Ores Tashvar*.

UiGortyl?

Yes. Shasel, somethings happened. Whatever was blocking Kaiss signal has vanished. We think it was a guela communicator, holding open a channel with the shasla.

And now its gone? Can you raise him?

Not yet, Shasel. Theres a lot of interference.

Lusha took a breath, fighting the adrenaline. Korui, he said, keeping his tones measured and calm. Listen very carefully. Find Fioel Boran. Tell him to boost the signal. Tell him I need to be able to speak to Shasla Kais.

VIII

19.12 HRS (SYS. LOCAL DOLUMAR IV, Ultima Seg. #4356/E)

And Meyloch Severus, Governor-Regent of Dolumar IV, overseer of Colony 4356/E, ranking adept of the Administratum and appointed forgemaster of Mechanicus Industrium Dol.322, was pushed unceremoniously into a tiny corner of his own brain.

Perhaps, as the daemon consciousness that had hissed and murmured to him for twenty-one years finally grew bored of whispers and snatched up his body like a puppetmaster, Severus realised all too late that hed been betrayed.

Powers untold. Riches without number. Eternal life. Daemonhood. All these things and more hed been promised. Instead he was brushed aside and *used*.

Tarkhaxs freedom was not yet complete, but, growing impatient, the daemonlord chose to conduct the last moments of the ritual that would release him himself, rather than whispering unsubtle instructions into some foppish idiots subconscious. Hed grown strong enough, now, to control his disciples body even from within the vestiges of his warp cage.

It was but the tiniest glimmer of the power hed wield when the walls came crashing down and he imposed himself into the physicality of a host body.

A strong host body.

He glared through Severuss eyes at the tau ethereal and dismissed the grey figure as a possibility. The host would need to be corruptible. Tainted.

Attempting to infiltrate Kovashs mind had been like waves breaking against a cliff. It would take centuries to wear him down. Ironical, then, that it would take just moments to wipe him away utterly. He raised the knife for a killing blow.

Severus had captured the admiral and ethereal with good intentions, Tarkhax supposed. Two high-ranking officials, corrupted and returned to their people, would be a valuable resource indeed. But the admiral had broken like dry wood and the ethereal was a steel fortress. Two extremes. Both useless.

The knife caught the light hungrily.

A doorway opened behind him with a wet gurgle. He grinned.

Ahh he groaned happily. Cometh the man.

He turned in his place, uncomfortable with the ungainly movements of the governors body, opting instead to levitate, eyes glowing.

It wasnt who he expected.

* * * * *

Kais stepped into the vast chamber and choked. He felt like thick cords were wrapping around his chest and mind constricting his breath and torturing his thoughts. His impressions of the pit floor came at him in a jumble, twisted by chaotic influence. He felt himself stagger.

Sludge.

Sunlight, weak and dying, filtering down from above.

Blood.

Walls of damp obsidian, spine-encrusted and laced with runes and sigils that flexed and coiled with a life of their own.

Shadows.

Four sub-chambers, carved gargoyle gods glaring from stonehewn walls above writhing altars.

Smoke.

The pillar of light; an energyspike that rippled up from a star at the base of the pit into the dizzying vortex heights above.

Evil.

And the guela governor. Walking on the air, eyes and mouth and ears burning with living fire, staring down at him with a twisted leer. The Montau devil overcame Kais utterly and said: *Were home.*

Its you the human hissed, its voice a medley of screams and echoes and cobwebs, nonetheless contriving to sound annoyed. I was expecting the Space Marine You were always my contingency plan

Kais levelled his gun, not listening. He gritted his teeth and dragged his hand onto the trigger, curled his finger around the familiar shape and

And froze.

You cant, little tau, the thing said, its laugh a dry rasp. Youve been prepared.

What?

You think that little whisper in your head is yourself? Your mm what did you call it? Your Montau. Your rage. Heh heh heh

What do y I dont

Youve strayed away from your path, little tau. And Ive led you.

Kais sank to his knees, bile rising in his belly. It was too much.

I sensed you this morning, when you set down on this world. Ive had millennia to prepare, little tau. Millennia of oozing myself into the minds of mortals. Ive whispered and hissed into more brains than I can remember, through the years. I tasted your species this morning, like a fine wine, and

found it wanting

Nnn

So disappointing, I thought. An incorruptible race. No psychic powers. No dark desires or secret horrors Hmm On that count, at least, I was wrong. You merely keep them well hidden

But you alone among thousands. I could taste you! Such bitterness! Such shame!

You're strong, there's no doubt about it. You're skilled at your craft. You cut a bloody swathe to me like a knife through the warp, but not because you could

Because I made you want to

And now you seriously think you can cast off my gift and kill me? Little tau, you have a lot to learn.

Kais retched on air, feeling his muscles going limp. G-get Get out of my head

You and the Space Marine. My two choices. I called you to my side and you came, like faithful cubs. I've played you like puppets, little tau. And now I'm out of time, and the Space Marine is late, and you will have to do.

You wouldn't begrudge me a little blood before you die, would you? I must drink of the host a *corrupted* host before assuming its flesh. That's how it works, little thing. It would be such a pity to damage you any more than necessary

The body drifted forwards, coruscating energies ebbing from its wide eyes and leering mouth, a blaze of skin and fire. In its hand the dagger was a slash of light. Kais couldn't even breathe, frozen solid by the very fury and rage that had sustained him. Betrayed by his own blood. Deceived by his own mind.

Kais, a voice said. Kais, look up.

He obeyed and there, hanging suspended far above him in the air, spread-eagled and glowing with purity and peace, radiant and glorious and unified and balanced and perfect, was Aunel Tau Kovash.

Kais, he called out, voice full of exhaustion and effort. Even when broken, a sword may still cut.

The Aun closed his eyes and serenity enveloped Kais like a warm cloud, filling his mind with peace and purity and the glowing features of the ethereal. Was there a taste, he wondered? A faint scent taste that rushed through his body like warm jhal nectar, cleansing and purifying.

The ethereal smiled from on high and Kais was free. Invisible bonds fell away, the Montau shrivelled and died. He could move again. He could raise his gun again.

For the Greater Good, he said, and shot the thing that had once been Severus in its heart.

For a second, but little more, Severus was free.

The daemon fled from his mind with a shriek, clearing his senses and opening his eyes fully for the first time in twenty-one years.

He was bleeding. He was bleeding and hed

Oh, by the throne, hed

What have I done? he gurgled, memories lancing through his mind, panic gripping his soul in the icy cold certainty that it was far, far too late for absolution.

As the colour went out of his vision and his ears roared with the sound of his own blood, he glanced once at the face of the timepiece on his wrist.

Emperor have mercy he said, and died.

The timepiece read:

IX

19.19

The sun set.

Korvesa 66.G#77 (Orbsat Surveillance), had it possessed the ability to emote, might have remarked upon the particularly fine display of colour painting the planetary ionosphere blood-red.

It might have been intrigued or perplexed by the momentary burst of blue-white light that dappled its sensors over a particular point of land several kilometres east of the war torn capital city.

It might, conceivably, have given a damn. Instead it drifted by, blanketed by the thick silence of voidspace, recording and analysing; unable to judge.

The governor coughed and went still.

Kais watched smoke ebb from the gun barrel for long moments, wondering what would come next. The supposition that there were more trials to face was instinctive; for him to believe otherwise was ludicrous.

Silence spread through the cavern: an emptiness that felt like it could go on forever. Like a veil drawing across the world, the last spectral traces of sunlight died from above, leaving only the unnatural malefic glow of the walls themselves.

Kais closed his eyes and allowed himself, tentatively, to wonder whether it could really be finished. Done with. Over.

He heard: *Drip*.

A droplet at a time, parting from Severuss corpse with slow gravity, thin strands of blood ran together in a long rivulet that curled and twisted in its course towards the depression at the pits centre.

Kais watched it with morbid fascination, frowning as the blood touched the base of the energy spike, pooling softly and dragging reflected light across its meniscus. It crackled, a silverfire glow racing back along the bloodstream to consume the corpse, stretching out tentacles of light into the floor and walls, snapping and hissing and spitting sparks.

And then the storm hit.

The ground shook. The room flashed white and red and green; Kais tumbled and fell onto his hands and knees with a strangled cry and Kovash, high above, lips moving soundlessly in some impervious litany of calm, was released from whatever sorcery held him in place.

Kais watched his fall almost all the way. There was a crack of bone at the

end, and perhaps the merest hint of a cry.

And suddenly everything everything hed achieved this rottaa, everything hed faced and overcome, every horror hed defeated, every fear hed banished, every flaw hed accepted was *worthless*. The ethereal was dead.

And this time the rage couldnt be restrained. This time the cloak of serenity was cast off with a scream, the false mask of unity and equilibrium shattered on his face and his blood seemed to boil behind his eyes.

The madness came down, his muscles bunched like cords of fiotak and in his memories he slaughtered every friend, butchered every ally and exploded his fathers glaring eyes into a billion damp fragments.

The Daemonlord Tarkhax shrugged off the hated warp prison like some awful infant clawing its way, snarling and spitting, from the womb.

The sun had set. The rituals were completed.

A blood sacrifice had been offered, dragging his essence thirstily into the shell of an empty host vessel.

The walls came crumbling down.

Eldar dreamweaves coiled away into dry nothingness, webway intricacies collapsing upon themselves in whirligig storms of empyrean haze. Tarkhax oozed into reality with a shriek and a ghostly halo of warplight, flexing its ethereal extremities in triumph. The daemonlord focused upon the hollow tube of light and fire that stretched between dimensions and surged into the physical realm.

It had been too long. Oh, powers-in-the-warp, too long!

The host body was hardly perfect, of course. The tattered morsel that had once been Governor Severus was far from ideal but

Yes Yes, it was adequate. Needs must, in such circumstances.

The malefic consciousness had waited three thousand years to taste physicality again: manifesting into substandard flesh was, it supposed, better than nothing. It would not take long to secure a superior vessel.

Draining the last of its ectopic being into the meat host, Tarkhax opened its eyes its real eyes for the first time in three millennia.

Tarkhax Faalkraztiil Koorlagh Thrasz, Changer of Ways, disciple of Tzeentch, agent of transience and modification, hissed its pleasure to the world. It rejoiced. It gloried. It exulted in the carnage that would follow.

It would butcher humanity and slaughter tau-kind; it would rampage across the void dragging behind it a veil of shadows; it would burn the galaxy to a cinder in the name of the Changer of Ways and eventually, with none to stop its ascension-It would murder reality itself.

A maelstrom of light and heat danced across its human body, returning its thoughts to the present. It turned its attention to offering obeisance to the dark

pantheon that would sustain it, knowing that all its power was derived from their arcane gifts and favours. Tzeentch was a doting patron, filling Tarkhax with strength and vitality, but only by pleasing each of the Lord of Changes brother-gods could it hope to regain the full strength it had enjoyed before its imprisonment. It had been an avatar of Chaos Undivided in that black time; lofty heights of malignancy and power that it would re-ascend!

It took a breath, ignoring the mundane details of the temple abyss, hardly even glancing at the snarling tau that had released it, and turned to face the pulsing shrine of its master.

Oh, great Tzeentch it rasped, feeling some transient corner of the warp shifting and sliding in response. It seemed that the monstrous attention of the Lord of Change, mystic gaze wrapping around like tentacles, fell upon Tarkhaxs existence and gave it form.

Blessed be! the daemonlord shrieked, gaseous shapes ossifying around the host-vessel. *Blessed be!*

Kais gnashed his teeth like an animal and didnt care.

The governor creaked to his feet, oblivious of the chasmic wound in his chest. He stared at his hand for a moment, as if fascinated by the simple physicality of his digits. His face creased into a necrotic smile and he said: Yes!

And then he was gone; lost at the heart of a light-bloom, a malignant supernova that writhed and took form around him. Kais would have staggered back, quailing at the shape that rose up from the blossoming energy, but the instinct to flee was drowned by the rage and fury. Gripped by anger, filled only by an image of the crumpled ethereal and his own wasted efforts, Kais was surging forwards with a bellow before the daemons shape had fully resolved.

It was a cloud, briefly. A thing of tendrils and pseudopodia that shook with internal spasms and dissolved, rarefied features contracting and warping. Severuss glowing form remained aloft, burning through the translucency of the flexing vision like a luminous heart, bisected by the energy spike at the pits centre.

It was a cloud and a serpent and a devil, all at once. A tree without roots, an ocean of blood, a starfield seen in negative, a prowling tpel predator, a rotten fruit.

Endlessly shifting, the riot of shapes and forms still somehow contrived to form a whole, like the teardrop of shadow in an endlessly-flickering flame. It was a wraith, rising up in some ethereal parody of a figure, its robes billowing and snatching in an invisible gale, three times as tall as Kais and striated by pennants and spines and lights. Clad in a writhing ensemble of blue and gold,

the daemon-aspect clutched at a staff of pure night and thundered with a bellow that shook the abyss, carrion features splitting along a vulturelike beak. Vast wings of blue and yellow, as insubstantial as paper but beating with the force of a hurricane, encircled the flexing shape and rustled, sparks and smoke coiling from each feathertip.

Kais didnt care. He fired and reloaded, shouting and spitting and cursing, and when lightning poured from the staff, a river of sparks and ionised air that clawed at the ground and charred the sludge wet floor glassy and smooth, he dived and rolled without thought, lurching upright in a single movement to fire again. Smoke coiled, ozone wafted across his senses, the daemon loomed over, and he didnt care.

Die! he howled, all control gone, Get back! Die! The words themselves had little significance beyond the need to emote; to roar and bellow his fury at the world. Any target would do, even one as horrific as this.

He was blind to the reality, uncaring that his shots had no effect, that the daemon merely laughed at his rage, that his fury was inconsequential, a termites temper tantrum in the face of an anteater.

Abruptly the words of the dead admiral, spoken before the mans transformation mere raikors ago, ghosted through Kaiss mind.

It draws its strength from the the Dark Gods hed said, clutching at his face, as if the very knowledge revolted him. I saw I saw it. In its prison. Oh God-Emperor, its almost free! But it it needs their strength It needs their patronage to restore its powers

Kais hadnt understood and said so, but the man was oblivious, perhaps aware of his impending alteration, and had rushed to complete his cryptic pronouncement.

You cant kill something like that. hed hissed, Not really. Y-you you can only stunt it starve it of power before its fully formed take away its sustenance You have to send it back to where it came from!

The shrines! It takes its strength from there! Y-you understand? The shrines! *Remember!*

Kais had kept his word: he had remembered. Hed remembered although he hadnt understood. Only now, his blood screaming for violence and death and destruction, his mind shrouded behind the veil of Mon-tau imbalance, now he understood.

Four daemon aspects. Four Dark Gods, bestowing their gifts upon a cherished child. Four shrines.

Leaping over a vengeful bolt of lightning with a cry, he rolled and dived for the nearest antechamber, where a cord of yellow light hung aloft and snaked between the bellowing Daemonlord and the writhing altar.

Looking back, he saw that the fluttering monstrosity was tethered

somehow, as if unable to stray far beyond the energy-spike at the centre of the pit. Finding its prey beyond its grasp it turned its back on Kais, robes pulsing like half-melted liquid, and faced the next of the shrines. The human body, glowing at the things centre, was speaking and gesticulating grandly. Paying homage, Kais realised, to the next of its evil masters. Inviting more power into itself.

Kais, thoughts racing, turned the muzzle of his gun upon the altar beside him.

Across the pit the daemon stiffened as if stung, inexplicable senses clearly aware of this new threat. Robes drifting, shadow-wings flexing it turned its feathered skull, radiating white heat, and hissed in warning.

The railgun fired with a flare of light and gurgled a smoky column of ozone.

The altar shuddered, shot ricocheting with an ugly whine and a fountain of sparks, impacting dustily against the shrine wall. Glowing, as if with some arcane shield, the altars shimmering defence briefly severed the glowing cord that connected it to the daemonlord.

The brute seemed to sag minutely, aware that, even temporarily, the power source it suckled upon greedily was gone. Its fury sent serpents of gauss lightning thrashing along the pit walls and inchoate plasma storms raging and battering at the ground around Kaiss feet, blistering his underhooves and gashing at his legs. Tumbling and rolling through the maelstrom, ignoring the burns tattering his flesh, Kais took aim upon the daemonlord with clenched teeth and fired.

And fired.

And fired.

And this time each shot thudded into and through its armour with a brassy clang and a wet slap of parting flesh. Its screams were like music.

Tarkhax, through the haze that passed for its mind, felt the warp construct pulse and crumble. The sustenance it drew from its master, Tzeentch a comforting flow of warmth and power stuttered and failed.

The Lord of Change, ever-watchful gaze staring bale-fully through the warp, turned its cheek dismissively and cast its disciple aside.

The daemonlords fury at the defeat was a white-hot torch. Unable to vent its madness fully, it turned to the next shrine and dipped the host-bodys head in greeting, hands forming complex shapes in the air.

Bless me, mighty Slaanesh. *Bless me!*

Kais staggered back from the squealing monstrosity, howling in triumph.

The fragments of its robes rained like broken glass, dissolving and

writhing even as they fell. The flickering images that haloed and oozed throughout the collapsing shape coiled upon themselves and aborted, slurping away into the ether, leaving only the hunched Changer of Ways and, glowing at its translucent centre, the fiery body that had once been Severus.

The second shrine illuminated with a vile purple glow, snatching out a cord of light to intersect the energy spike. Ethereal shapes began to form around the daemon, smokelike appendages that bent the light and cast a new aspect across the daemons horrific form.

Kais sighed, reloaded the gun wearily and prepared himself for more.

LaKais, come in! Kais? Are you getting this?

Silence on the comm.

UiGortyl? Are you still there?

Yes ElLusha. Im listening in.

The signal boost isnt working. Try something else!

Fioel Boran says hes running out of ideas, Shasel. Theres just too much interference.

Thats an excuse, Korui. Tell him Im not interested. Tell him I want a comm-link. Tell him theres something going on down there and I want to know what. Results! Now! ElLusha out.

Kais sagged to the ground without a hope, leg finally giving way, and prepared himself for the end.

The daemonlords second aspect had been a dream.

A thing of musk and stench: writhing barb-tendrils coalesced around its avian features, sensuous tongues and pseudopodia threatening to overwhelm Kais with a heady mélange of pleasure and pain. It had groaned and screamed, shivering with whatever agonies and ecstasies it inflicted upon itself. At one point it lashed out with a hook-tipped tentacle, faster than he could hope to react, and dragged him hungrily towards some wet-lipped orifice that yawned open upon its chest. It puckered hungrily, dribbling moisture, and vented a blast of thick haze in his face. The musk coiled through his thoughts and dampened his mind, every movement felt like wading through an ocean of feathers, and he dropped to his knees to laugh insanely as, like some obscene slug, the mouth oozed itself forwards to roll hungrily over him. The daemons wings dipped down to encircle him, blotting out the light.

Kais snarled at his own fallibility, raging inwardly against the cloying effects of the drug. Mercilessly, as if punishing himself, he pushed his fingers deep into the gash on his shoulder; probing and twisting until he was sure hed pass out, screaming unstoppably, feeling fluid warmth spreading across his

arm and chest. Under such an assault the soporific musk fled from his senses like vermin before a cleansing flame, leaving him scrabbling aside and gagging, even as the monstrous sucker mouth squirmed closer.

After that he'd wasted no time in shooting the purple shrine his satisfaction at its writhing discomfort no more dulled by the pain than by the intoxicating haze. Thus defenceless and severed from its second patron, the daemon gibbered and slunk away. Kais emptied the last of his grenades into its various mouths and oily orifices, hacking at its fronded tendrils with his knife before they could curl unctuously around his limbs. As it detonated from within it sounded disturbingly as though it was enjoying the experience.

Kais had begun, in that moment, to entertain the insane idea that he might just prevail.

He should have known better.

Turning to face the next shrine, the Changers body rippled and altered subtly, inflicting a new aspect upon itself. It became *disease* personified.

The writhing shape, avian face sagging with pus and pestilence, slouched forward tentatively. What little skin it had was blotched with mildew and bruise patches, hanging flaccid about its joints with little to prevent it from sliding and creasing with every creaking arthritic movement. Beneath the grisly dermis was a web of wasted muscles and suppurating sores, hernia knots wobbling and bulging fleshily, cascade gaps punched through to rotten bone and cancerous organs. There was no science to its appearance, no sensible arrangement of parts beyond the haemorrhaged disorder they clustered around, slopping jelly-like in pools of bile and pus. Its wings, once vibrant and exotic, now hung tattered and torn, feathers spiralling away with every movement. It keened lowly, like an animal in pain, and reached out its gnarled hands, supporting itself on its staff.

Kais hadn't been much concerned by this pitiful thing when it manifested, attached as it was to the green, pestilent shrine chamber by a glittering light stream of flies and filth, but he'd quickly realised his folly. There were things living in the daemon's body. Tiny balloon-like monstrosities that chattered and giggled, sucking on sores and clawing at the diseased flesh with their miniature limbs. They fixed their beady eyes on Kais and gibbered, rushing forwards in an endless tide of slime and haphazard physiology.

For every one he exploded with a satisfyingly wet direct hit, another three pushed their way past atrophied organs and emerged from the corpse, in a living carpet of pestilence and horror. Kais limped away from them, clinging to that tiny spark of sense in the sea of rage that told him, despite the desire to launch himself into their fray with a bestial roar, that rushing in to tackle these squealing prey things would be the last mistake he ever made.

The wound on his leg betrayed him. Infused with infection and filth from

his long journey, it cramped and oozed a thick bloody sludge, grinding and opening with a life of its own. Responding to the presence of its lord and deity, the nascent disease in his flesh magnified and rejoiced, sending out its bitter tendrils into the surrounding tissue. To Kais, it felt as though his entire leg was dissolving, sending him clattering to the floor with a groan.

The Nurgling swarm rushed onwards, grasping out to claim him, hungry to share their plague gifts. Kais felt his blood rebel against him, leaving him shivering, unable to properly hold his gun. He kept firing regardless, holding them off less and less with every raikan, slumped against the pit-wall.

And then he was down to his last clip of ammunition.

And then the daemonlord slouched ponderously towards him, ulcer claws reaching out. And now he was going to die.

The man, such as he was, pushed at the sphincter door weakly, refusing to allow exhaustion and pain to overcome him.

The vox was mangled, emitting a constant stream of white noise that he could neither shut off nor encourage to receive other signals. It was beginning to grate on his nerves.

The door wouldnt open. Taking a deep breath, ignoring the bloodslick trail he left behind him, he thumbed the activation-rune on his chainsword and treated the membranous portal to an appraising look.

Courage and honour he muttered, unable even to summon the appropriate gusto for a battlecry.

It had been a long, long day.

The first chittering midgets were almost on Kais now, tiny limbs flexing outwards, wide faces breaking in toothy grins. They pounced forwards, sinuous tongues flicking spittle and slime in their wakes, and

And gunfire ripped through their ranks in a savage melee of tiny limbs, scabrous flesh and mucal fluids. The hungry chatter of a bolter echoed throughout the chamber.

Back! a voice grunted, thick with anger and pain. Get back to the warp, Chaos filth! Get back in the name of the Emperor!

Ardias ripped through the remains of a sphincter portal with a savage growl and swept the daemon creatures away with a sweep of his chainsword, revelling in the devastation. His armour was chipped and cracking, one arm messily fragmented below the shoulder, and the bronze sealant ring around his neck was shattered in two, components and cables bunched up in disarray. Despite his ragged appearance, Kais had never been so relieved to see another being in his life.

I should have known better, the Space Marine growled, with perhaps the

merest hint of a smile, than to trust something like this to a xeno. He arched a respectful eyebrow briefly at Kais and returned to pumping bolter shells into the thrashing plague corpse.

Better late than never, human, Kais said, weakly.

Ha!

Slowly, Kais dragged himself upright, every toril a lesson in agony. He was surprised to find his leg still there at all it felt as though it had bubbled away to liquid filth long ago.

The shrine he grunted, supporting himself on the wall. Shoot the shrine!

If Ardias doubted the bizarre advice he gave little sign of it, spotting the lurid green antechamber and stomping inside with a scowl. Kais heard the unmistakable rattle of bolter fire from within and, for the third time, the glowing cord of sustaining energy faltered.

Shakily he raised his gun, gratified by the daemon-lords gyrations, and took aim. The railguns breathless reports merged bizarrely with the sharp hammering of the Space Marines weapon: a chorus of punitive destruction that blasted great slabs of rotten meat from the writhing daemonform and sent lurid streamers of infectious waste cascading through the gloom. Bored out by railgun rounds, the monstrosity detonated along its spine to a series of vengeful bolter shells and lay still, pools of sludge draining from its ragged shanks.

For Ultramar! Ardias cried, clashing his pistol against his chest. *Ave Imperator!*

He turned to face Kais, features bisected by a feral grin.

You dont understand Kais muttered, suddenly overwhelmed by tiredness and pain. Theres one m

Red light filled the cavern.

The fourth aspect lifted up behind Ardias.

He never knew what hit him.

Tarkhax scrabbled for vengeance. Its formidable manifestation was denied it. Each in turn, its dark gods had turned their unkind faces away, disappointed in its performance.

Only one remained, now. One last chance at revenge. One last chance to crush the fleshy maggots that had brought it so low.

Mighty Khorne! the daemonlord raged into the warp, sensing the bloodlust rising in its consciousness, feeling the fleshshape coalescing around it. Deliver me into *form!*

And Khorne delivered.

And it all came back to Kais.

(In the mundanity of reality, the Space Marine hit the wall and crumpled to the ground, flicked aside by a nonchalant swipe of one armoured gauntlet.)

Hed killed so much, this rotaa. He was a broken knife, hewing at flesh and sawing through bones. Hed faced more than any Fire Warrior should face in a lifetime.

(The daemonlord unfolded to its full height, wiry form clad now in colossal armour, articulating with the blade-edged rasp of metal on metal.)

Hed been lucky, there was no doubt of that. But there was skill there, too. A skill that would never flourish beneath the restrictions of the tauva. A skill born in enjoyment and savagery: utterly alien and separate from the Greater Good, but able to serve it, from a distance, nonetheless.

(Its avian features twisted apart, horned and leering, eyes and beak and nostrils blazing with inner fire. It rolled its head loosely, spine-pillared shoulder-guards shrugging.)

He should have died a hundred times over, this rotaa. Was there a cost, he wondered? What price would he pay for such unnatural fortune?

(It was an armoured slaughterer, wings shedding the last of their coloured feathers to reveal the black-leather folds of batflesh beneath. It curled its vast knuckles, blood-patinad chainmail wrapped and stapled to its very flesh, around an axe that dribbled red fluids, threw back its head, and roared.)

Everything balanced, in the end.

(It bled. It bled a sticky crimson carpet from every joint in its armour, from every chain mail link and every jagged connection of chains and spines and ancient skulls. It was a blood-monster. A gore-ogre. A butcher-giant.)

Equilibrium over excess.

(When it moved, striding forth and raising up that sickly slick blade, as big as Kais himself, the red mist of heat and vapour rising off its gory surfaces followed it like a shroud. A blood veil.)

Cheat death too often, and theres always a cost.

Kais thought: Ive paid the price. Ive killed and killed and killed, and survived, and all it cost me

Is my sanity.

The butcher daemon cocked its head at the tiny thing before it, stretched out a hand, and let its bloody aura, its dark mantle of shadow and gore, slip out of its fingers and into Kais mind. The Montau devil came slinking out of its mental shadows. Kais couldnt resist it now. His consciousness rolled over, his rationality dissolved away into the bloody mire trickling through it, and he surrendered himself utterly, without regret or hope of salvation, to the rage.

His lips had parted before he even knew what he was saying. The air was rising in his lungs. His tongue formed the words without his bidding.

And all he could see in his mind was his father, staring down from his

moral highground, spewing his expectations and judgement upon the youth before him.

Shasla Tau Kais threw back his head, choked on bitterness, opened his mouth, and screamed: *BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!*

Red light lifted like lava from the pit, scattering the chittering daemon swarms and filling EILusha with nausea. It was an aura of savagery, merciless and insane, and if it was allowed it would swallow the world.

They were running out of time.

Were going in, he said, voice hard.

Shasel? VreWyr's voice betrayed his terror.

Were going in, he repeated, and stepped over the edge of the pit, jetpack flaring with a whine.

Kais stormed.

Unable to think. Unable to drag any rational thought from a mind occluded behind frenzy, he emptied the railgun of its last precious shots in a cavalcade of energy, neither caring or noticing that each shot achieved nothing, hammering uselessly against the daemons slick armour.

The slaughterlord watched in amusement, humouring its miniature attacker, and casually swatted at Kais with its fist. The impact hurled him across the chamber, exploding his breath from his lungs and crippling his right knee. He didnt care. Pain didnt matter anymore.

Useless as a ranged weapon, the empty railgun made a perfect bludgeon. Utterly berserk, barely even sentient, only the tormented core of Kaiss mind, where the last fragments of his sense was besieged, recognised the ludicrousness of his attack; hammering at the butcher daemons legs, snarling and spitting and dribbling: utterly insane. Unable to properly stand, he staggered and crawled and yelped like a wounded uit, unwilling to submit to any premature mercy killing.

He wasnt fighting any daemonlord. His muscles didnt ache from his struggle against Chaos, or the guela. It was all a lie. All a replacement. All a substitute.

He looked up, and the face that looked down upon him, the face that he battered his gun against and stabbed with his knife and vented himself utterly upon

Was that of Shaso Tau Shiur.

Kais murdered his father a million times in his mind, and when the daemonlords axe hacked off his left arm he barely even noticed. His body gave in. His brain didnt.

And then there were voices.

ais? Come in Kais?

He ignored them, wondering abstractly how he could go on killing with only one arm left. He pushed a fist against the stump and squeezed it tight, cyan blood welling between his fingers. The daemonlord cocked its head and laughed and laughed and laughed, watching as its enemy bled across the chamber.

Kais? Kais, can you hear me? It seemed to be coming from inside his helmet. This is Lusha. Its ElLusha Were on our way, Kais. I know you can hear me! Come in, Kais!

You knew my father, Kais said, not thinking, unable to move. There was blood inside his helmet now, too. He could feel it. You knew him, didnt you?

Kais?

Answer me!

What? I Yes, Kais. Yes, I knew him. I was there when he died. I fought with him for taucyrs. Kais where are yo

He was perfect, I suppose.

What?

He was perfect! Never did anything wrong, I expect. Perfect.

Kais, what is th

Im just an echo, ElLusha. I see that now. Just a ripple on a pond.

Kais, your voice Its

All I am, and all Ill ever be, is a bitter little shadow cast by him.

There was no reply. Kais couldnt bring himself to care. Everything seemed to be going slowly, now. There was less colour in the world. Everything was cold.

Kais. Kais, you listen to me. You know how he died, Kais? You know how your father died?

serving nn serving the machine

He died because a tyranid yhevre put a dent in his battlesuit and he wouldnt fall back until hed taken his revenge. He died because he wouldnt listen when we told him we all told him it was time to withdraw! Hot-headed, Kais. He was a son-of-a-uit with a temper, and a poor judge of character.

Something cold opened up in Kaiss mind.

W-what?

He shot a shasui, once, just for questioning orders. Did you know that? He was a snaeta, Kais. A mighty general and a powerful fighter, but a snaeta nonetheless.

But but the machine

That was his genius, child. He understood the machine. Its the whole thing

that matters, not the parts inside. He made his speeches, he blurted his sound bites to keep the porhui happy. Then he went right back to being an impetuous grathim.

Get it into your head, Kais. The tauva isnt real. Nobody ever reached it.

Were always getting closer, always approaching, but never arriving. As long as we go in the right direction, as long as everything we do is done in the name of the Greater Good *then it doesnt matter how far from the path you are!*

Kais opened his eyes, and everything had changed.

The daemonlord sensed something was wrong. The bloodlust it had gifted to the tau creature was waning. It evaporated like water, unclouding the tiny morsels mind and leaving it cold and sharp: a dagger of focus that no amount of insidious corruption could ever penetrate.

It didnt matter. A pure tau died just as easily as a tainted one.

He watched it struggle with its helmet, single arm scrabbling weakly at the clasps. Tarkhax watched in amusement, enjoying its bloody frailty.

Finally the helmet came off, and the taus grey features stared up, eyes fluttering against unconsciousness. It wanted to face its death head-on, Tarkhax saw. It could respect that, at least.

Riding on the surging bloodlust, filled by Khornes brutal patronage, the daemonlord raised its axe.

The tau threw its helmet.

It tumbled across the floor towards the red shrine of the Blood God, and bounced once, twice, three times, coming to rest against the rune-daubed obsidian with its glaring optics staring upwards sightlessly.

Tarkhax turned its gaze back upon the dying little creature, perplexed by this bizarre final act of defiance.

The tau smiled.

And the dud bolter shell, buried deep inside the fiotak of Kaiss helmet for so many exhausting decs, was heated by the play of malefic energies across the monolith.

It detonated with a sooty roar, and the swirling madness that was Tarkhaxs link to the butcher god died with a tug of energy. It shrieked its fury to the world, hefting high the axe that would obliterate forever the cringing morsel that had denied it even the smallest of deific patronage, and

And there was the screaming of jet engines, and the ghostly distortion of anti-grav drives, and bulky shapes falling from the sky with weapons roaring.

Kais kept watching until the battlesuits had used up all of their ammunition and the hulking daemonlord was eradicated from physicality forever.

Then the world went grey.

Then the world went black.
And there was peace.

EPILOGUE

The thing in the warp thought of glory.

It was surrounded by a million, billion of its kind. Frothing and fizzing like spawning fish, running together in the ether, dragging their claws of nothingness against reality with scant hope of ever breaching the distance between the two.

In this place of madness a memory was difficult to hold. Thoughts were unfocused, uncontrollable things, impossible to grasp and concentrate upon.

Nonetheless, struggling against the innumerable tide of its fellows, the warp thing raced across the vastness of the empyrean and remembered or perhaps dreamed of the time that it had been Tarkhax, Changer of Ways, Devotee of Tzeentch, Daemonlord of Chaos.

A man, who was not a man, stood upon the bridge of a starship and stared at the orb of matter in space before him.

He was a superhuman, or as near to one as it was possible to be and his skin, which was made of ceramite and plasteel, was blue.

The planet seemed serene from his vantage point: a swollen belly of earth and sand, hidden in shadow, waiting for the morning.

It would not come.

The sensation of teleportation was still uncomfortable to Ardias, and combined with the dangerously high quantities of stymmchem and pain-reducers the apothecary had administered, he was left feeling off-balance and hazy. Since regaining consciousness in the silence of the Chaos pit, he had had little time to simply stand and stare.

The tau flotilla diminished into the void on the surveyor-screens, watched closely by Captain Brunt and his command crew.

They're gone, a servitor said, quietly.

Ardias pondered briefly upon the xenogens. A young race, by human standards and dangerous. There was no doubt of that. Their time would come.

Load torpedoes, he grunted, returning his attention to Dolumar IV. Target

the Chaos temple.

The captain knew better than to argue. With what? he asked, uneasy at the Ultramarines presence. A bombardment would, I assure you, collapse even the deepest

Ardias turned to him with eyes flashing.

Cyclonic torpedoes, He said. Viral bombs. In the name of Emperor and Guilliman, purge the planet.

And three tau, dressed loosely in fire caste regs, armourless and helmetless, stepped from the heat of daytime Tau into the cool shade of a domed building.

This way, ElLusha said, voice barely a whisper. His clipped steps betrayed the acute discomfort he felt, and his two young companions exchanged a glance, careful to conceal their nervousness. Several fiovre medics, squat and bright in cream lab coats, scurried between chambers quietly.

The pair followed ElLusha along snaking corridors, curving architecture cooling their troubled minds and going some way to banishing their fears. Fiosorral artworks, sweeping frescoes and mandala patterns, bolstered their serenity, so that when they stepped finally into a small antechamber they felt refreshed and ready for whatever was to come.

As if reading their thoughts, Lusha fixed them with a sombre gaze. You should prepare yourselves, he said, searching their eyes. He is different. He was changed by his ordeal.

He gestured towards a door and a small viewing panel yawned open silently. Shasui Tau Ju and Shasui Dyanoi Yhol, newly promoted, swallowed and stepped forwards.

By the path Yhol hissed, tottering back on his replacement bionic leg in shock. Ju mumbled a calming litany under her breath, dragging thin fingers across her mouth.

Lusha watched them closely. I I thought that you deserved to see, he said, awkwardly. He talks about you sometimes, the fiovres say. He says you were his friends.

Yhol frowned. We *are* his friends, Shasel.

Were, Shasui, Lusha corrected. He thinks youre dead. Or maybe he thinks hes dead. Whichever it is, there are no friends in his world anymore.

How did he come to this? Ju whispered, more to herself than anyone else.

Lusha chewed his lip, searching for words. By going too far into a place that no tau should ever venture.

You mean that that pit? The porhui wont give any details.

Lusha laughed bitterly and tapped at his head.

No, UiYhol. I mean into here. We all have darkness inside us. We hide it away and pretend its not there, but it is. And the only way to stay clear of it is

the way of the tauva. But even the One Path wont light up every shadow. Kais went too far into the darkness.

Ju shook her head, bewildered. So hes gone then? Lost forever?

Perhaps. Perhaps not. He needs time now, thats all.

Why did you bring us here, Shasel? Yhol didnt take his eyes from the viewing panel as he talked. The truth. You could have just told us.

Lusha sighed. Because someone needed to know, Shasui. LaKais is a hero. He kept the machine grinding along so that no one else would have to admit to the the Montau inside them. He gave himself up for the Greater Good, and no one will ever know.

They stared. And time passed.

And they left.

Alone in his mind, Kais walked the path.

He walked the path and he fought the Montau devil.

He raged and he killed; he relaxed and he focused.

He went deep inside himself, and refused to come out until, one way or another, he knew which way along the path he was walking.

It wasnt as lonely as it could be, because every time he dared to open his eyes just to check that the real world was still there he could look down at his one remaining hand, strapped carefully in place to the restraint pallet, and read the tiny fragment of display wafer that someone had placed there.

It was broken. Only a sliver of text remained, without context or meaning, but somehow somehow it felt right.

It simply said: *With pride.*

Scanning, formatting and basic
proofing by Undead.

